

rising sun (my heart bleeds for you)

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by [Selenellene](#)

Summary

"Betrayal and forgiveness are best seen as something akin to falling in love." - Bedelia Du Maurier

Deposed Prince Seokjin hides as a servant in the very palace he used to live, and unknowingly falls in love with the alpha set to take his crown. Which desire will win, that of revenge or love?

- ABO royal au that came about from watching one historical kdrama/cdrama too many -

ARC ONE: PRINCE {COMPLETE, 1-6}

ARC TWO: SERVANT {COMPLETE, 7-21}

ARC THREE: CONSORT {COMPLETE, 22-30}

FINAL ARC: KING {31-34}

Notes

listen ya'll, historical inaccuracies await. just imagine this is a fantasy country in the past with mostly korean culture but a few Western elements mixed in (i.e. as if Korea was exposed to the West far sooner than usual, but it's not really explored in depth just talked about) that's what i envisioned when writing LOL



Lady Hae's Rumor

Chapter Notes

TW: offhanded mention of murder and very barely, BARELY implied mention of rape in one sentence

if there's something else you believe i should put as a warning, please comment. i probably forgot or didn't realize the severity of it, as when i am writing, i'm trying to write from the viewpoint of seokjin, who is desensitized to all the horror and gore around him :/ i tried to proofread and look for anything that may be hurtful to readers, but i am only human and things can be missed.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It started, as things usually did among the king's court, with a rumor.

Seokjin first heard it from Lady Hae during one of her weekly tea gatherings. She'd placed her teacup down rather ceremoniously in the middle of teatime and cleared her throat. Once everyone quieted, she began her attention-seeking tirade.

"Crown Prince," she addressed Seokjin. "I heard a rather...interesting rumor from my sister the other day. She lives in the countryside, you see, and she told me about something that pertains to you, Your Highness."

Lady Hae then plucked the fan that was placed to her side and spread it in front of her mouth, blinking coquettishly at her guests. She was trying a little too hard for Seokjin's taste; he could already tell her aim. She hoped to tease the nobles gathered, perhaps even get Seokjin to beg her to share her coveted news.

He'd only given her a lazy look and raised an eyebrow. "Well? Is this rumor real or not?" he asked, tone letting her know how unnecessary he thought all of this was.

Hae flushed a rewarding shade of red at the curt words of her prince, dropping the fan on the table and with it, her act. The eagerness to share her findings must have outweighed the embarrassment and outrage she felt. She leaned forward and looked around furtively before whispering her tale to the small group before her.

Most were aghast at the rumor; it seemed inconceivable that such a thing would happen to a country as stable as theirs. Others were less disbelieving. Lord Mun had merely given a huff and crossed his arms over his chest, then looked to Seokjin.

We all knew this was coming, his eyes seemed to say. Even you, of all people.

Seokjin forced his hands to tremble, the movement barely noticeable to the untrained eye. The nobles around him, though, would pick up on it in an instant. He had to push down the anger that threatened to spill out his mouth at their ravenous gazes. Seokjin needed to appear calm and levelheaded. He was serene Prince Seokjin, the only Kim without a temper. He couldn't come off as furious in the slightest, as any sign of anger would allude to possible madness.

The crown prince did not let any panic or anger show. He simply folded his hands in his laps, lips quirking. "Oh?" he said. "Is that all?"

Lady Hae gaped for but a moment before bristling. "Is that all?" she repeated, astounded. "Your Highness, I fear you don't understand the severity of the situation."

Her voice, which had been a soft whisper, was quickly beginning to rise and become noticeable. *Good*, Seokjin thought. *Let her get angry. She's weak when she's angry.* Seokjin waved his hand. "How severe can the gossip of commoners be?"

Lady Hae's sore spot was her own lineage. It was known by all within the palace that Lady Hae had been a lowly tailor's daughter, elevated to her position only by her marriage to Lord Hae, which some whispered was the result of a few strategically placed aphrodisiacs in the lord's food. If Seokjin thought Lady Hae was embarrassed before, she was fully outraged now. The whole of her face and neck became consumed by a gaudy pink color. Even the bite mark on her neck was thrown off by the shade of her shame.

"This is no simple commoners' gossip!" she proclaimed boldly, standing from her seat. "We are talking about a rebellion against the king, Your Highness! How could anyone lie about that?"

Her voice seemed to echo across the courtyard, bouncing off the hedges and statues until they hit the ears of servants who had frozen in place upon hearing her words. Almost immediately Lady Hae remembered herself and glanced around, eyes landing on the servants, who ducked their heads and scurried off, most likely going on their way to tell whatever master they worked for.

Lady Hae looked faint. "Oh, oh no."

Lady Nam, Hae's sister-in-law, rose and placed her hands on Hae to steady her. "My dear sister," she murmured. "It appears the sun has made you faint and ill. You're rambling such nonsense in the middle of the day. Let me attend to you, please."

Lady Hae blinked several times, quiet, before she sucked in a deep breath. "Yes, I suppose it has."

Before the disgraced omega made her exit, she fixed Seokjin with a pinched look, as if promising retribution. Seokjin would have felt more threatened if her eyes hadn't been moist with tears.

Lord Sam left a few moments later, most likely to relay the news to whatever other social circles he ran in. It was the same with Lady Paek, leaving Seokjin and Lord Mun alone together in the courtyard.

"You handle the nobles so beautifully," Lord Mun remarked once Lady Paek was out of earshot, shaking his head. "If it's a game to you, then I must say you're winning."

Seokjin reached forward and brought his teacup to his lips. "Have you ever played chess, Lord Mun?" he questioned, wetting his lips.

The older man frowned. "No? Should I have?"

Seokjin shook his head and set his cup down with a clink. "Not particularly. It's a Western strategy game, much like janggi. There's different moves and names. If you ever do so happen to play it, perhaps you will learn just what it'll take for me to win this game you speak of."

The king. I have to go after the king, went unsaid. Seokjin kept treasonous thoughts like those under lock and key, buried deep and far away from even his own reach. His enemies always surrounded him, each one a snake poised to strike at any sign of weakness. Seokjin had to stay two,

three steps ahead if he wanted to avoid the force of their fangs. This rumor business was part of that strategy. Seokjin had had one of his servants visit Lady Hae's sister last week to relay the very real rumor in person, all in the hopes that it would eventually make it back here to his father's court.

So you see, it began with a rumor. A rumor that Seokjin helped spread? Why, of *course* not. It would be known that Lady Hae started it in the first place after all.

The king was quite furious with the whole rumor business. When the news reached him that his court was now aware of his struggles to maintain authority in the countryside, he'd promptly demanded the arrest of whoever started the rumor. Seokjin was lucky enough to be there when the king received the news, and so he had the opportunity to offer his knowledge on the subject.

"I heard it from Lady Hae, Your Majesty," Seokjin murmured, bowing before his father. "She proclaimed it for all to hear during her tea session the other day."

If Seokjin had been younger and more foolish, perhaps he would've been scared at the bloodthirsty expression on the king's face. His father was an intimidating man, towering over most of his court, and he had dark, piercing eyes which seemed to see to the very core of your soul. His once thick black hair had turned a brittle grey as the years went by, and the lines on his face had only deepened. His face was usually a dark red or purple shade, as he was angry most of the time.

"Lady Hae?" the king hissed, nails digging into golden armrests of his throne. "That wench? Have her taken into custody immediately! We can't have my own people hearing such lies!"

Adviser Paek dropped to his knees before the king to start his plea. "My king! Lady Hae is the wife of the most noble Lord Hae, who oversees your fields in the south. Surely you would not want to damage the relationship between you both. He has been loyal to you for over fifteen years!"

Condemn Lady Hae and you'll lose one of your wealthiest supporters. You can't afford that kind of setback right now, not when you've already lost the Jeon clan, Paek most likely wanted to say.

Seokjin could almost feel the frustration that seeped through those words. Adviser Paek was all that remained of the king's impulse control. If it weren't for him, the king would've beheaded half of his court by now as well as taken to bed all of the widows. If worse came to worse and Seokjin became desperate, he knew to go for Adviser Paek first.

"Perhaps banishment would be a proper punishment for Lady Hae. I can't think of anything that would pain her more than being taken away from court," Seokjin offered his own opinion.

His father ignored him, growling. "Then who shall I hang? All the servants who repeat this slander, all the nobles who hear it? What am I to do when my subjects no longer respect my authority?"

"Perhaps if we have the servants responsible given lashings, while the Lady Hae herself can be taken away from your court..." Paek trailed off, making Seokjin's suggestion his own.

Seokjin refused to meet Paek's gaze, which he knew was pitying or smug or even a little bit of both. The king's dismissal of his son, his own heir, was known to every member of the court. If it had not been for Seokjin's own hand, he would have held no power at all among the nobles.

The king gave a nod at Paek's words, waving his hand wildly. "Yes, yes. Fine! Do that, then, if you must, but have my lady wife brought to my chambers. The Phoenix has a fire that must burn."

Seokjin could not help but roll his eyes at his father's words. The Kim dynasty had made their sigil

the phoenix after the legendary creature that marked their skin, and in the king's later years, he had begun to refer to his temperamental moods as "the Phoenix". Seokjin thought that it stemmed from a belief that the king himself was a phoenix.

Perhaps his father was noble and brave in his youth, as a proper Kim should be, but now not a trace of those finer qualities remained. The only thing that marked him as a Kim was the bright orange and gold that adorned his left forearm, the feathery flames raised in flight. Seokjin glanced away from the birthmark, feeling his own seem to warm in response. The phoenix that graced Seokjin's skin was hidden on his upper back, and so to most people it did not exist.

The king stood suddenly, and both Seokjin and Adviser Paek bowed before him as he made his rather dramatic exit, flinging the throne room doors open, robes billowing behind him. Once he was out of earshot, Seokjin stood.

"Drat. I had hoped to tell him of my progress in my studies," Seokjin sighed, appearing regretful. "This business with Lady Hae ruined all that."

Horseshit. Seokjin had come for one reason only: the fallout of Lady Hae's rumor. If she was killed by the king, it would estrange him from one of his staunchest supporters. If she was banished from court, it would rid Seokjin of one of his annoying enemies. Either way, the visit had been fruitful.

"Don't be too hard on yourself, Seokjin," Paek muttered, placing his hand on the prince's shoulder. "Your father will come to see you for who you are one day."

Seokjin felt his stomach roll at the adviser's familiarity. He brushed Paek's hand off of his shoulder. "Your Highness," he corrected, voice cold. "I wasn't aware that the two of us were on such friendly terms, Adviser Paek."

Paek's friendly facade soured at that, but he addressed Seokjin properly this time. "Your *Highness* then," he stressed. "This whole affair is rather strange. When I first heard of it, I knew I had to consult you on the matter. Tell me, do you know anything else regarding Lady Hae's rumor?"

Seokjin glanced away. "I know only what she told me the day she revealed it to us. Nothing more, nothing less."

Paek frowned deeply at Seokjin's words. "Curious, curious," he mused.

The prince decided to humor him. "What do you mean?"

"Only a select few of the king's court could have known what the rebels were up to, and Lord Hae wasn't privy to that sort of information," Adviser Paek murmured.

Seokjin paused, mouth twisting into a frown, as if he was truly considering those words. "Someone in the king's inner circle is trying to stir trouble then?"

Adviser Paek shifted from one foot to the other. "Most likely. What truly concerns me is that...the Bangtan Four may have a mole stirring up the trouble for them."

A mole? Were the rebels so organized that Paek believed they could infiltrate the king's own court? The worry in Seokjin's voice was not nearly as fake as he would've liked it to be when he spoke next. "What would anyone among the court stand to gain with abetting commoners who want to abolish nobility?"

"I wish I knew," Adviser Paek sighed, narrowing his eyes. "Just be careful, Your Highness. There

are eyes watching everywhere.”

The old man’s tone was far too patronizing for Seokjin’s tastes. The prince gave a firm nod, and Adviser Paek let go of his sleeve, hand falling to his side. Seokjin had made it only a few feet before the old man called to him again.

“Oh, Your Highness?”

Seokjin turned. The corners of Adviser Paek’s lips curled in a mocking grin, and his eyes were anything but kind as they raked over Seokjin’s body. “I suggest you visit your brother soon. Your scent is beginning to dull. If I didn’t know any better, the court may mistake you for a beta.”

It took Seokjin a few moments before he was calm enough to dignify the snide comment with a response, and by then, he’d dug crescent-shaped marks into the palms of his hands.

“Of course,” he said curtly, letting his hands relax at his sides. “I’ll be sure to follow your advice.”

Do us all a favor and choke.

Adviser Paek was one of Seokjin’s least favorite people. The old man liked to pretend he was your friend, buttering you up with compliments and concern, lending an ear and giving sage advice when you were in need. He was so friendly that you couldn’t help but trust him. That trust would be your undoing if Paek had his way. He gathered people like they were toys, treating them like they were special and dear to him, but they were only stepping stones, pawns that he could use to further his position. Seokjin had learned this firsthand.

When Seokjin was twelve years old, he had come to Adviser Paek for help. Little Seokjin spilled his secret and pleaded with Paek not to tell his father, the king, for fear that it would cost Seokjin his life. The prince would never forget the warmth of Paek’s hand as he patted his head, drawing him close in a hug and telling him that it would be all right. Paek had taken and hidden Seokjin in his residence for the night. In the morning, the adviser sent for the king.

It was a hard lesson, one that Seokjin took to heart. Nobody within the palace was to be trusted. Not Paek, not the maid who chose Seokjin’s outfits, not the kitchen servants who snuck him treats, and most certainly not Seokjin’s own father.

There was only one person that Seokjin could confide in, the same person that Adviser Paek had suggested he visit. A part of Seokjin wanted to refuse to visit his brother, if only to spite Paek, but when he thought of how nice it would be to see him again, how freeing it would feel to smile and actually mean it, he knew he could not.

He’d been wanting to visit Taehyung soon anyways.

Seokjin’s brother didn’t live in the palace as he should. Their father had sent him out a few months ago without any explanation to Seokjin. When Seokjin asked Taehyung about the sudden rift between father and son, the younger boy had evaded the question.

“He’s crazy,” Taehyung said simply, shrugging his shoulders. “Nothing more to it than that.”

Seokjin knew that wasn’t the case. If any son was to be sent from the palace on the king’s whim, it would’ve been Seokjin. His father had held a particular dislike for him ever since he presented. Taehyung, on the other hand, had been his pride and joy, even if he was of ill birth. Taehyung didn’t bear the Kim clan’s mark on his skin, yet had presented as an alpha. That was enough for the king to ignore his illegitimacy.

Though Seokjin would never admit it to Taehyung, there was a time when he had feared for his position. What was to stop the king from stripping his eldest of rank and gifting it to the favorite bastard instead?

Those fears were for naught. The king barely spoke to Taehyung now, and he'd placed him under house arrest on an estate between the grime of the capital and the outskirts of the palace's reach. Taehyung's estate was in poor condition the last that Seokjin had visited; the sanitation system always clogged and the house was on the verge of collapse. To make matters worse, there were only three servants there to work on maintenance and repair as well as tend to Taehyung himself. Seokjin had hoped that his younger brother's living situation would have improved since his visit those few months ago.

It seemed the prince was mistaken. Even with the shadows surrounding it, Seokjin could make out the crumbling, faded structure of Taehyung's house as he approached. He felt a shiver creep up him as he stepped onto the porch, wood creaking in protest. Seokjin pulled the hood of his dark cloak tighter around his face, protecting his priceless features from the slight chill of wind. He'd hoped that visiting Taehyung at night would be inconspicuous. If he came back with frostbitten cheeks and toes, however, it would be a dead giveaway that he'd been off somewhere at night.

I'll never forgive Taehyung if my face is ruined here tonight, Seokjin thought to himself. His own beauty was one of his best features. To lose it would be a fate worse than death.

Taehyung's estate was all too easy to sneak into, and Seokjin made a mental note to see about instilling some guards who weren't inept. The door wasn't locked either, opening with a creak as Seokjin made his way inside. The crown prince wasn't the least bit sneaky, and yet he had made it inside the house without any protest. Just as he was thinking this, however, a dagger pressed itself against his throat.

"Who sent you?" his brother hissed dangerously.

Seokjin frowned, each and every muscle in his body stilling. His features were hidden by his cloak, and there was hardly any lightning. Taehyung couldn't recognize him. Seokjin began to turn slowly, knowing that Taehyung just needed to see a glimpse of his face, but the knife only pressed closer.

"Don't. Move," Taehyung commanded through gritted teeth. "I'll slit your throat if you do. Just tell me. What are you doing here?"

"I came to borrow your clothes," Seokjin admitted, feeling the exact moment the realization struck in the tension of Taehyung's grip. The knife clattered to the floor below, and Taehyung sucked in a deep breath.

"Hyung?" he cried. "You didn't tell me you'd be coming! In the middle of the night, no less!"

Seokjin turned finally and lowered his hood, eyes falling upon the gauntness of Taehyung's face, the paleness of his skin, and the dryness of his lips. "I didn't want anybody to try and stop me," Seokjin said faintly. "If I sent word to you, then more people would know. I thought it'd be better this way."

His brother surged forward to wrap his bony arms around Seokjin. "I could've killed you, you idiot!" he laughed. "If you needed some more of my garments, then you could've just asked for them. I would've sent them, no problem!"

Seokjin returned the hug, breathing in his brother's sweet, warm smell. Taehyung, even though he

was obviously malnourished, still had the frame and disposition of an alpha. There was an almost dangerous tension in the way he held himself, and his dark eyes held a wild light to them. “Fine, then. I wanted to see *you*. Happy?”

Taehyung beamed. “Absolutely!”

Seokjin took a step back and held Taehyung at arm’s length. His clothes were frayed and dirty, unbefitting of a prince, even one of Taehyung’s station. Seokjin’s mouth twisted into a frown, and he reached forward, pinching his brother’s cheek. “What do we pay your servants that they don’t feed you enough, hmm? And these clothes! You’d think you got them off some poor beggar on the streets!”

Taehyung yelped and rubbed at his sore cheek. “Hyung!” he whined. “You worry too much.”

“And you don’t worry at all!” Seokjin huffed. “Someone as poorly trained as I managed to sneak into your humble abode. Where’s your guard at this time of night?”

Taehyung shrugged. “Sleeping, I expect.”

Seokjin gaped. “*Sleeping?*”

“Dowon can’t guard me all day long,” Taehyung defended the man, as if they were close friends. Knowing Taehyung, they most likely were. The younger Kim brother had a knack for befriending anyone, regardless of social class or dynamic. “He has to sleep sometime.”

“Let me guess,” Seokjin scowled. “Your other servants are sleeping, too.”

Taehyung paused for a moment, his nose twitching. “No?”

Seokjin crossed his arms over his chest. As expected, Taehyung’s servants were completely useless. Seokjin would have to have a few choice words with the fools who managed Taehyung’s finances and household. If it was a matter of funds, then he’d have them draw from his own allowance to cover the costs. Taehyung deserved better than what he was getting here. The whole matter would have to be done discreetly, however, so it may take some time. Seokjin would rather not “ignite the Phoenix’s fire”.

“You’re a horrible liar, but fine. Show me your kitchen.”

Taehyung’s eyes lit up. “Are you going to cook for me, hyung? Really?”

Seokjin sighed, clicking his tongue. “It looks like I have no choice in the matter.”

Though it was only recently that Seokjin started to receive lessons from the palace staff in cooking, he’d always held an interest in it. When he was younger, he would sneak inside the kitchens to watch the chefs do their work. It fascinated him that they could take plain food and make such beautiful, tasty treats from it. Back then, Seokjin would not have dared to attempt recreating any recipes for fear of his father’s wrath. Cooking was a task reserved for omegas and betas, not alphas. Now, Seokjin’s own disappointing presentation had done wonders in allowing his father to turn a blind eye to his son’s lackluster hobbies.

Taehyung’s kitchen was as Seokjin expected, a cluttered mess of rusted utensils. Seokjin paled at the sight of it and clutched his heart dramatically. “Tae,” he cried. “This hurts me. It truly does.”

Taehyung gave him a hard shove, huffing. “We can’t all have silver spoons and feasts every night. Living like this has made me grateful! You should try living poorly sometime, hyung. Maybe then

you wouldn't be so arrogant."

"Psh, me? Arrogant?" Seokjin preened. "You're too kind."

His younger brother rolled his eyes, but settled himself on a chair to watch as Seokjin made japchae. He had to forgo the mushrooms, which would've taken hours to soak. There was no meat to the dish this time either, as Seokjin couldn't exactly get anything from the butcher's in the middle of the night. The fire he'd use to cook would already draw enough attention as it was. Instead of becoming stressed at this thought, however, the prince felt most of his worry leave his shoulder as he worked. Was making a meal for his brother risky? Perhaps. To Seokjin, it was worth it to know that Taehyung would have a belly full of warm food.

When the meal was placed before Taehyung, who gave a large, exaggerated sniff, he seemed to catch the scent of something else besides what Seokjin made.

"Oh," the alpha blinked. "You were right. You do need some of my clothes."

Seokjin scoffed. "Did you think I *only* came to see you?"

Taehyung chose to ignore that question, stuffing several noodles into his mouth. After slurping them down with an appreciative sigh, he spoke. "Have you been taking your medicine regularly? Usually my scent sticks for three months. This time it lasted only one."

Seokjin paused at Taehyung's words. His brother was right, though Seokjin wished he wasn't. The prince hadn't really thought about that problem yet. He swallowed the lump that was building in his throat. Would he have even realized it, if it weren't for Adviser Paek's words?

A favor I owe unwillingly, Seokjin thought darkly. *I'll have to give him a gift when next I see him.*

"I take it every morning without fail," Seokjin shook his head, frowning. "I think I may be...becoming immune to it. I've taken it for years, after all. Maybe my body is starting to build up a resistance to it."

His hands shook at the thought. What was he to do if that were the case? More than his brother's clothes, more than the scent of an alpha, the true key to hiding his identity lay in the herbal remedy that he drank every morning.

The court knew that Seokjin was not an alpha. How could they not? His scent would wane over time, then suddenly become strong again after a visit to his brother's. Seokjin was a beta masquerading as an alpha in their eyes. It was the worst kept secret in his father's court.

On purpose.

The suppressants that Seokjin had taken ever since he presented at the age of twelve kept his true scent under wraps and allowed him to appear as the beta that he wasn't. His brother's scent was a subtle deflection, one that worked well. There were only five other people alive who definitely knew that Seokjin was an omega: Adviser Paek, the king, Taehyung, General Mun, and the court omega whom Seokjin received his suppressants from.

"If things weren't so tense at court, I would take a short leave. Maybe go off and live at a temple for a while. *Something*. I fear the suppressants will malfunction at the worst possible time, and the less people that witness that, the better," Seokjin voiced his worries aloud, unafraid of who might hear.

He could already imagine if he went into heat in the middle of court, the greedy looks on the faces

of the vultures before they descended, proclaiming Seokjin to be an unfit heir and petitioning the king to strike him from the line of succession, to which his father would have no choice but to follow through on. All of Seokjin's hard work would be wasted in a matter of minutes.

"Don't worry, hyung," Taehyung wrapped his hand around Seokjin's hand, squeezing tightly. His eyes narrowed, showing his resolve. "If anything happens, I'll be there in a heartbeat. No matter what it takes."

The severe look on Taehyung's face combined with the noodle that hung from the side of his mouth made a comical picture. Seokjin cracked a smile. His brother was on house arrest, but there were few guards to enforce it. He knew that Taehyung would make good on his promise if need be.

"Ah, that reminds me!" Taehyung snapped his fingers, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand afterwards. "Dowon went to the market the other day and heard rumors about those rebels you told me about last time. The Five Bulls? Bulletproof Five?"

"The Bangtan Four," Seokjin corrected. "I wanted to ask you about them, too. Adviser Paek does nothing but feed into my fears. He's suggested that the rebels have a mole on the inside."

Taehyung tilted his head to the side. "That's...not good, I'm guessing?"

"Only the king and Adviser Paek are fully aware of the rebels' movements, and they pick and choose what they relay to the court. They must have reason to think highly of those behind the revolts, if they truly do think they could've placed a person inside," Seokjin explained.

Taehyung, for all of his physical strength and way with the sword, was nowhere near as skilled as Seokjin when it came to politics. Together the brothers were unstoppable. Apart they were merely one half of a whole. Seokjin blamed the discrepancies on the difference in their upbringings. Taehyung had lived with his mother for the first nine years of his life, and when he came to court he was untouchable as the king's favorite, taught to fight instead of his numbers and characters. Seokjin, on the other hand, had been forced to forgo his own sword lessons in exchange for ones on etiquette and strategy after he had unexpectedly not presented as an alpha.

Seokjin placed his hand on Taehyung's head, ruffling his fair hair. "Worse could come to worse. Be ready to run at a moment's notice, Tae," he murmured. "And no matter what, think of yourself first. Me second."

Taehyung swatted at Seokjin's hand, frowning. "I would think of you first, hyung. Just like you would think of me."

Seokjin huffed in frustration, unable to find the words to explain how he felt. Though he was an omega, Seokjin did not have much love to give. Perhaps in order to offset this contradictory occurrence, it was his brother Taehyung, the alpha, who loved too much in his stead. Taehyung had so many he cared for and so many who cared for him. Seokjin only had Taehyung.

If Taehyung lost his older brother, he would have other loved ones to lean on for support. If Seokjin lost Taehyung, then...well, there would be no recovering from that. That was why it would be best if Taehyung focused on himself, instead of worrying about Seokjin.

But Seokjin could not say any of these thoughts, for fear of making his brother's burden even heavier.

"Just be especially careful then," Seokjin conceded. "Keep your ears open and your mouth shut."

Now's not the time to attract any unwanted attention."

Taehyung rolled his eyes. "There's not much ruckus I can create stuck here all day. You're the one in the middle of a viper's nest. *You* should be careful."

"Aren't I always?" Seokjin puffed out his chest. Taehyung threw a noodle at him, which Seokjin ducked to miss, his odd, yelping laugh escaping him at the action.

It was moments like this one, where Seokjin felt as light as feather, that made him feel truly alive. He could forget all the worries that plagued him, the stress of the palace and the endless plots he would have to unravel come tomorrow morning.

What I would give to be this carefree, he thought. *To not have the worries of a prince.*

Seokjin arrived back at the palace with the fresh smell of alpha covering him and the scented clothes of his brother in tow. One of his servants took the clothes with a nod, while his other servant, an elderly omega named Jae, readied him for bed.

"It was a fruitful mission then, Your Highness?" Jae murmured, bringing forth a basin of warm water for Seokjin to wash his face. Jae was nearly bald and had more wrinkles than there were stars in the sky. He'd been taking care of Seokjin since the prince was a squalling babe.

"I would not be as peaceful as this if it hadn't been," he sighed, dabbing at his cheeks with the soft towel that Jae passed him.

"You must be more careful to arrive sooner, Your Highness," Jae advised. "The less sleep you get, the more circles you'll receive under your eyes in return."

Seokjin froze and swore, inspecting his face for any sign of bags in the mirror beside his bed. "Yes, yes. You're right on that one, Jae. I'll have to remember that. This face isn't getting any younger, after all."

Jae only gave him a smile, bowing as he was dismissed. Seokjin promptly scurried under his covers soon afterwards, all too regretful of the midnight excursion that may have cost him his beauty.

I should've just went during the day, he thought forlornly. *Then I wouldn't be worried over something as avoidable as this.*

Despite this anxiety, Seokjin managed to drift off to some much needed sleep. Unfortunately for the omega, however, that sleep was interrupted mere hours later by the ear-splitting cries of a woman.

Seokjin summoned his servants and dressed quickly. The guards who'd been keeping watch over his chambers followed him as he calmly made his way over in the direction of the wailing. It was coming from the courtyard, where several nobles, servants and guards were gathered. All of them were surrounding one woman in particular, a court lady who was on her knees, crying and pleading as she made a pitiful scene. Upon seeing just who it was that had disturbed his beauty sleep, Seokjin refrained from rolling his eyes.

"Lady Hae," he greeted the woman who was making such a fuss. "Whatever is the matter that you should wake the entire palace at a time like this?"

"Crown Prince!" Lady Hae cried breathlessly, shuffling over and lunging for the bottom of Seokjin's robes. "Please, there's been some kind of mistake! You have to tell them!"

Seokjin looked to one of the palace guards, who was standing nearby with an exasperated look on his face. The guard held up a document in his hands, emblazoned with the seal of the king.

“It’s the king’s orders, Your Highness,” the guard began, glancing at Lady Hae. “He wants Lady Hae removed from court indefinitely.”

Seokjin rose an eyebrow. “Well,” he said, “it doesn’t seem like there’s much that can be done about that, Lady Hae, other than following orders.”

“Prince Seokjin!” Lady Hae wailed. “Why am I the one singled out? The whole court repeated that rumor, so why am I the only one suffering for it?”

Seokjin bent so he was eye-level with the court lady. She looked a right mess, her makeup smeared and hair tangled. Snot ran from her nose, dripping down her chin. Seokjin couldn’t help but smile at the sight. “Why, Lady Hae. Don’t you remember? You’re the one who brought the rumor to court. You’re the source of it. I would say you brought this on yourself, no?”

The prince gave her a mocking pat on the head and rose, a skip in his step as he left. He gestured to the guards to use physical force if necessary to remove Lady Hae, and the crowd followed his lead in leaving. Seokjin had gotten several yards when-

“Lady Hae will not forget your dismissal here today, Crown Prince,” a quiet voice spoke out. “You’ve made yourself one more enemy than you needed.”

If it had been anyone else, Seokjin would have taken it as mocking advice. It was Lord Min, however, who spoke the words, his father’s hostage and someone Seokjin was confident meant him no harm.

“Yoongi,” Seokjin greeted, calling the lord by his first name.

Min Yoongi was a curious sight to behold. It was rumored that his father had lain with a witch, and that was the reason for his abnormal features, his hair a striking white and his skin paler than most. He dressed himself in dark colors that only accentuated his ghostly features, perhaps in an attempt to drive off whatever suitors that may come his way. Some court ladies had mockingly referred to him as “The Wraith”, but Seokjin dismissed such insults when he heard them. If anything, Yoongi was more like the moon than a wraith.

The two had known each other for years, having met at the funeral of the former Lord Min when they were fourteen. Everyone who was anyone had been in attendance for that funeral, as many of them hoped to pick and prod at the vast fortune Lord Min had left behind to his only son, an omega. The royal family had gone to act as a mediator of sorts, hoping to make sure that Yoongi was wed to an alpha fitting of his station. It was known that whoever married Min Yoongi would inherit all that the Min clan had to offer.

The very idea of that had been displeasing to Seokjin, who accompanied his father to the funeral with his own goals in mind. Upon meeting Yoongi and his lackluster circumstances, Seokjin’s mind was made up and his plans implemented. It was thanks to Seokjin that Yoongi had escaped the shackles of matrimony to some old geezer with a harem, but it was also in part to his manipulations that those shackles had been traded in for ones offered by the palace.

Every good gain requires a sacrifice here and there, Seokjin reasoned with himself. And I’m sure Yoongi would rather be here than married to his slimy uncle.

“Should I have lied to her then? Told her that I would put in a word with the king and she could

expect to be back in a week?" Seokjin asked lightly, raising an eyebrow.

Yoongi's lips quirked. "Sometimes it's better to tell a small lie than a hard truth. Lady Hae is an unforgiving woman. It's better to have her on your side than not."

Seokjin couldn't help but scoff. "Are we talking about the same Lady Hae? The one who spilled her wine on me for not offering her a dance at the last ball? The Lady Hae who mistook my mother's memorial service for my birthday celebration?"

"You may think she offers you nothing. I will admit, the lady has few skills. She is impolite and emotional and would bring in no other allies than her husband and sister-in-law," Yoongi inclined his head, eyes daring to meeting Seokjin's own. "But she is loyal. I myself have found that loyalty is a very rare trait to have, especially in a place as toxic as this. Tell me, Seokjin, how many can you say would not turn on you, even when offered power or prestige in return?"

Seokjin's lips twisted into a frown. Yoongi would sometimes offer his insight into Seokjin's plays at court, and when his viewpoint differed greatly as it did now, Seokjin was forced to swallow the bitter distaste that gathered in his mouth.

"I'll consider your words," he stated. Ignoring Yoongi's question provided the answer to it.

"May I ask, do you still take your tea every morning?" Yoongi asked.

Seokjin's eyes lit up in recognition. "But of course! My day wouldn't be complete without it."

Yoongi quirked his lips upwards. If it weren't Yoongi performing the action, Seokjin would dare to say that it was a grin. "I'm glad. You see, I sent some tea over just this morning. I was hoping that you might learn to favor the same brew as I. It's more...potent, if you will."

Seokjin stilled. Did Yoongi know of the troubles that had been bothering him as of late, the growing unreliability of his current dosage? It was amazing that he had managed to pick up on it, considering Yoongi and Seokjin rarely met or passed each other in the halls.

"I'll have to head back to my rooms so I can try it," Seokjin said. "I wasn't able to take my tea like usual with all of the ruckus this morning."

Yoongi nodded his head, seeming to understand that the message had gotten across. *The current suppressants I've given you don't seem to be working as well anymore; here's some new ones.*

If there was but one person in the palace Seokjin would have to pick that he could trust in the slightest, it would have to be Yoongi. It was Yoongi who shared his stock of medicine with Seokjin, who offered tips and tricks to certain schemes or plays of Seokjin's at court. Yoongi had covered for the prince more times than not, and Seokjin would hesitantly call him an equal of sorts, but never a friend. Friends and loyal servants did not exist at court, no matter what Yoongi said. No one here could be trusted completely.

Perhaps that was a paranoid outlook on things, but Seokjin would rather be paranoid than betrayed. A part of Seokjin did yearn for a confidant at court, but Seokjin was not one for gambling with his own heart. In fact, in less than a week's time Seokjin would be grateful that he had guarded his heart so closely, for else it would have been crushed by Min Yoongi's inevitable betrayal.

EDIT AS OF 10/18/18: ALSO, I thought i should give you the pecking order/how things work in this omegaverse.

Male Alphas > Beta Males > Alpha Females > Beta Females > Female Omegas > Male Omegas

A female alpha can impregnate other females or male omegas. They can also carry a child, though the likelihood of conceiving is very low. A male omega can get pregnant, but they can also get other male omegas or females pregnant. BASICALLY, female alphas and male omegas are intersex! OK THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME

.....

this fic be just like kdrama because the summary they give you for the show doesn't actually happen until like five episodes (chapters) in... ;)

anyways i know that there's a lot of OCs right now and not all of the main players are here yet, but please stick with me!! haha, i'm afraid the overload of OCs and plot in the beginning will drive away readers, but i didn't want to wait until like a year later when this was thoroughly edited to publish it lmao (i crave that feedback ya'll). also if you don't like OCs, don't worry because most won't stay around if ya know what i mean :P next bts member to appear will come in chapter four, so please wait while i expand on the "fall" of the Kim dynasty :')

find me on [tumblr](#) and [twitter](#)

Bitter Taste of Justice

Chapter Notes

TW: description of menstruation (omegas are intersex in this fic, sorry i make the rules), also decapitation, and brief mention of child abuse :/// seokjin's childhood was not a happy one...

if there's something else you believe i should put as a warning, please comment. i probably forgot or didn't realize the severity of it, as when i am writing, i'm trying to write from the viewpoint of seokjin, who is desensitized to all the horror and gore around him :'/

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The dream began and ended the same way every time, perhaps because it followed Seokjin's own memory. Seokjin would appear to be waking from pain, his lower half twisting and contorting this way and that. He'd sit up, stomach clenching strongly, and all Seokjin would see was blood, his thighs and legs coated in the sticky, red mess of it. He let out a whine as he both heard and felt his bones and joints pop and crack, rearranging his body to suit his new dynamic. He couldn't stop himself from shaking. This was not the alpha presentation that had been promised.

Something besides nausea began to toss and turn in his stomach, and fear crept its way around his heart, clutching tightly. The royal doctors had all proclaimed that Seokjin showed signs of an eventual alpha, while every shaman who was summoned had also promised the next Kim king would be an alpha. Seokjin could picture the wrath that would come down upon him once the news reached the king.

"What good are you to me now? You're no son of mine, nothing but a whore," his father would sneer before the entire court. Perhaps he would even draw forth his sword right then and there to cut Seokjin's head from his shoulders.

Though Seokjin hadn't been taught much about omegas in his lessons, he knew that to be an omega was an awful thing, especially for a member of the Kim family. He would not be allowed to inherit any titles or lands without a mate to take them in his stead, and he would be struck from the line of succession immediately. Omegas could not be kings. The mere idea was unfathomable. The prince sniffled, blinking back tears that threatened to fall.

My crown and my future, Seokjin thought dully. Gone in one fell swoop.

He wanted to scream or cry at his own helplessness. Seokjin's own body had managed to fail him, and in doing so, Seokjin had failed the entire country. He was the only legitimate heir to the king, and yet the laws wouldn't allow him to inherit. His mother had died a few years back from the sweating sickness with no other children to her name, and any mates the king took after her could not bear children for the king. To Seokjin's knowledge, he had only one sibling: a half-brother begotten on some farmer's daughter.

Then who would be next in line? It was just last year that the rest of the Kim clan-every uncle, cousin, nephew left to the king-had been lost in a horrific fire. Seokjin swallowed the lump in his throat. His father's hopes, and those of the people, had all hinged on Seokjin inheriting the throne.

Now they would be crushed in the face of his disappointing presentation.

That's only if they know, though, the wild thought came suddenly to Seokjin's mind. If I can hide this from them, I won't be disinherited. Even if they do find out, who else will they have to turn to? There's no one left. Father will have no choice but to accept me.

He moved in a flurry, stripping his sheets from his bed. He used the undirtied sections to clean himself as best as he could, then hid the sheets and his nightgown in his drawers. Seokjin would have to find time to dispose of them without others seeing. Now was not the time.

Another wave of cramps washed over him, and Seokjin hunched over, pressing his hands to his lower stomach in a poor attempt to alleviate the pain. He could hide blood for seven days, no problem-it was what came after that worried him. Seokjin knew enough about omega biology to recognize that heat would come around two weeks later, but the details of it escaped him.

Seokjin didn't know how to prepare or hide himself from a heat. *I have to find somebody to help. Someone has to know what I should do. But who can I trust?*

Adviser Paek was the first person that came to mind. When it came to this part of the dream, older Seokjin would want to throttle his younger self, to shake him and warn of Paek's true nature. But alas, it was a dream, and older Seokjin could only watch as his younger self sought Adviser Paek for help.

The journey to Paek's chambers did not exist in this version of the dream. It was simply blurred out, and young Seokjin was seemingly transported from his room to Paek's, where he began to break down and cry, blubbering out his story. The old man appeared serene and calm, his wrinkled face emotionless as he listened to Seokjin impart his secret. The old man didn't seem shocked at the news. He simply patted Seokjin on the head with a benign smile and led him to one side of his room.

"Listen to me, Seokjin. I want to help you, but you have to trust me, all right?" Adviser Paek looked to Seokjin for confirmation.

The younger boy nodded his head, taking a deep breath to try and quiet his ugly crying. It didn't work as well as he would've liked it to. Adviser Paek gestured to his old bookcase, the one that was tall and cracked, impossible to move with the weight of so many heavy books on it. "You can go through here. It may be dark and scary. Just keep moving, though, and you'll make it to my private residence once you get to the end."

"Go through where?" Seokjin wondered, scrunching up his nose.

Adviser Paek's smile only grew, and he turned towards the bookcase, his hand hovering over the books as he searched for one in particular. A sound of triumph left his lips as he found what he needed, a thick, leather bound book with Western characters inscribed on its spine in gold. "Stand back now, Seokjin," Paek murmured.

Seokjin obeyed, nearly tripping over his own feet in his anxiety. As he did so, Paek pulled the book forward with a click, and the bookcase swung forward with a great rumbling to reveal a dark passageway. Seokjin gaped at the sight of it.

A hidden passage, he marveled. Just like the stories Jae would read to me. But here? In Paek's room?

"It's not as old as you might think either. I had it built in case any disaster should befall the palace.

Now I'll use it to help you," Paek patted Seokjin's cheek affectionately. "You can hide out there until I sort this business out with your father. All right?"

Seokjin nodded his head slowly, looking to the dark, endless tunnel before him. He took a hesitant step forward and trembled as cold air wafted over his face.

Adviser Paek caught Seokjin by the wrist before he could disappear inside the tunnel. Seokjin looked back at the man, whose eyes were crazed, as if someone had set fire to them. *This has never happened before*, a part of Seokjin whispered. *Something's wrong with this dream.*

"This tunnel...remember it, alright? Know the entrance and the passage by heart. You must remember it! Remember it!" There was an urgency to Paek's words, and his voice sounded almost distorted. The adviser opened his mouth, and a stream of words came forth in a stranger's voice.

"Beware the friendly cup, the bitter tea and olive branch. No one will dare to reach for a phoenix that flies."

The instructions which had been clear at first were tangled now, hidden with metaphors and symbolism that Seokjin did not understand. He only knew that he should run, that he needed to get out of there as fast as he could. But Seokjin could not move. Adviser Paek's grip was iron-tight, and Seokjin's own feet were welded to the floor as he started to shake, a whimper escaping him. He couldn't look away from the old man's face as it twisted into something unrecognizable, features ghoulish and frightening.

"L-let go of me!" Seokjin cried, but the creature's hold only tightened.

The figure before him became bright with oranges and yellows, consumed by flames that suddenly sprung forth. The fire licked at Seokjin's wrist, hungry and looming. It spoke with a great rasping voice that was as deep as it was hoarse. *A demon*, Seokjin thought, faint at the idea of it.

"Beware the dead and buried, who rise again under the witch's moonlight," the demon hissed, leaning in close so the flames were barely touching Seokjin's neck. The warmth emanating from the flames fanned against Seokjin's face in a mockery of breath. The shadows of the creature's mouth turned upwards gleefully as it rasped another riddle in warning.

Seokjin felt his knees give out, shock replacing the fear that had strangled his heart. The demon started to laugh, and the tips of its fiery claws were the first to go, blackening to ash and fading away. As Seokjin fell to the floor, the rest of the creature's form caved in on itself like a pile of ash blown away by the wind.

It was soon then that Seokjin woke from the nightmare, breathing quick and heavy. The prince immediately sat up, hand flying to his chest and felt the dark laughter still ringing in his ears. He called for Jae, who appeared after a moment and began to fuss over him, feeling his forehead and taking Seokjin's clammy hand in his own.

"Are you alright, my prince?" the older omega asked, raising an eyebrow as he inspected Seokjin's hand. "What happened?"

It took a moment before Seokjin could speak, the touch of his servant-a fellow omega-calming him. "It's nothing," he found himself saying, "but a dream. A nightmare, nothing more."

Jae pursed his lips, but nodded his head. He called for another servant to come in and ready Seokjin's water and clothes for the day while he tended to the prince, hands moving in circles around his wrist.

“Do you wish to speak of it?” Jae questioned gently. “It might help ease your burden.”

Seokjin shook his head. “No,” he said faintly. “It’s better left forgotten. I refuse to dwell on it.”

Upon realizing that Jae held Seokjin’s hand in his own, the prince jerked it away. The older omega retracted his own hands and bowed his head, looking thoroughly chastised without even a word from Seokjin. The prince swallowed the guilt that threatened to rise up; he couldn’t allow such familiarity with his servants, not even with Jae.

He would not verbally attack the older omega, however, as a part of him refused to do so. Instead, Seokjin fixed his attention on the other servant who had been called in, a timid girl who must’ve been either new or dull. She’d started to lay out clothes for a royal ceremony rather than Seokjin’s everyday wear. At least Seokjin would have a reason for yelling at her.

“What’s this? Is Father holding a banquet of sorts today? Are we praying for rain perhaps?” Seokjin scoffed.

The younger girl flinched at his words, beginning to tremble. “N-no, Your Highness?”

She was pretty enough, Seokjin noted. Wide eyes, auburn hair, thick lashes...her clothes were off, though. The girl’s outfit was a mismatched combination of that of a water maid and court lady both. She looked hastily put together. Seokjin glanced at her hands, noticing that they were far too fine to belong to a servant.

“Then why are you laying out ceremonial robes, hmm?” Seokjin crossed his arms over his chest.

Seokjin normally wore trousers and a shirt on days in which he had nothing of particular import to do. He reserved a hanbok for occasions in which impressions needed to be made or in which it was required that only formal dress be worn. It just so happened that the hanbok the servant girl was laying out was reserved for the rain ceremony, and as far as Seokjin knew, it had rained just last week.

“S-sorry, Your Highness. I thought that you had to wear the p-pretty dresses all the time,” the girl spluttered.

Seokjin’s eyes narrowed. “What do you mean?”

Jae came to the girl’s defense, perhaps sensing the danger that she had put herself in. “The hanbok is typically more expensive. To many commoners it’s all that nobles wear, Your Highness. Jisoo is new; she must still have these kinds of ideas in her head. Please, Your Highness. Have mercy on her.”

Seokjin looked from the shaking girl, her eyes teary and her face pale, to Jae whose mouth was set in a grim line. Did they think so little of him, that he would punish this girl so easily? Seokjin felt his lips quiver, the urge to smile far too great. *Serene Prince*, they called him to his face. *Ice Prince*, they whispered behind his back. Seokjin was sure that if he showed them too much emotion, he would’ve been labeled as unstable instead.

“Then teach her, Jae. I find it odd that such an incompetent servant was brought to serve someone as important as me. Such a mistake in front of my father would cost her her life,” Seokjin reminded them, exasperated. He waved his hand in the direction of the girl, who’d gone to her knees at Seokjin’s last remark.

“Leave me, girl. It will be less of a hassle once you’re gone.”

The girl nearly hit her head against the floor as she bowed, hastily exiting the room before Seokjin could find fault with something else. Once the door was slid shut behind her, Seokjin turned to Jae.

“Who sent her?” he asked, raising an eyebrow. “Was it Paek? Or maybe even Mun? His spies are always the most clumsy.”

Jae frowned. “I’m not sure, Your Highness. I was only told by the Head Servant that she was to be serving you from today onwards. She mentioned nothing else besides that Jisoo might be summoned elsewhere in less than a month’s time.”

At this Seokjin lost what little mirth he felt. When one spider was crushed, hundreds of others would rise from its corpse to weave webs of their own. Lady Hae had been the most obvious in her machinations as of late, more catty and awkward than the others. Seokjin almost regretted sending her away, if only because she was rather amusing. This, though? Sending their little bugs into Seokjin’s own household? *Annoying.*

Seokjin scowled. “Keep her away from me, please. Relegate her to washing my dinner plate or clothes. Whatever it is, I don’t want to see her.”

“Yes, Your Highness,” Jae murmured, inclining his head once more. The omega moved forward. “Do you need help dressing?”

The prince dismissed him with a jerk of his chin. “I can handle it on my own. I’m going to the kitchens today, so there’s no need in dressing up. Send for my tea, though. I should like to keep on schedule.”

Jae bowed one final time before he took his leave, hesitantly glancing up at Seokjin, his hands twisting in his sleeves.

“What is it?” Seokjin asked, a little annoyed.

“If the mark doesn’t fade within a day’s time, then I would advise seeing a shaman. It could be the result of a curse.”

The prince furrowed his brow. “Mark? What mark?”

Jae smiled and tapped the inside of his own wrist, running his fingers along the bulging veins there. “Why, the one on your wrist.”

Seokjin stilled, and it was as if he could see the fiery demon right before him again, feel its hand grab his left wrist in a grip so very tight and hot. He dared to glance down, only so he could dispel the image and the words of a foolish servant, but what he saw only fortified them both.

They were in the same place that the demon had held him in the dream. The furious marks on his wrist were almost like those made by an animal, except they’d been crafted by fire, not claws. If Seokjin had not been so horrified by their appearance, he would’ve marveled at the sight of them. The dream did hold meaning then, since it had managed to place its hold on Seokjin in the physical realm.

He looked up quickly, hoping to ask Jae about the marks, but the servant was nowhere to be found. Seokjin was alone. A chill washed over the prince, like the first frost of fall, and the demon’s last riddle came echoing back to him.

“Beware the unclaimed son, the phoenix with no feathers, for the Kim king shall fall on the blade he readies.”

Seokjin decided to shake all thoughts of demons and prophecies and all other supernatural happenings from his mind. To do this, he dismissed his guards and chose to pay the kitchens a visit. Cooking would take his mind off such heavy things.

He noticed several groups of palace maids whispering to each other as he passed them on his way. They threw several conspiratory glances in his direction, but Seokjin paid it no mind until he caught a few of their muffled words.

“-Bangtan Four took the east-”

“-king is celebrating-”

“-a banquet.”

It didn’t sound good. Any mention of the Bangtan Four was cause for concern, as it meant that there was a rumor going around that Seokjin himself had not allowed to start. Seokjin’s steps faltered, and he came to a stop. The prince turned his head and pointed to one of the maids.

“You,” he beckoned one of the younger girls over. “Come here.”

The maid looked to her companions and flushed, but obeyed, shuffling over to the prince. “Your Highness,” she curtsied.

Seokjin graced her with a benign smile. “It seems like there’s a rumor that my own servants have failed in relaying to me. Would you do me a service, Miss...?”

The maid tucked a stray strand of black hair behind her ear. She fluttered her eyelashes. “Jiyeon, Your Highness.”

“Ah, Miss Jiyeon!” Seokjin clapped his hands together. “What a pretty name for such a pretty girl. You must be rather well-liked. I’m sure you’ve managed to hear the rumor that I’m speaking of, the one about the-what was it, Bantan Fellows?”

“The Bangtan Four, Your Highness,” Jiyeon puffed out her chest. She looked around, only spotting her friends nearby who erupted in a chorus of giggles as they caught her eye, and seemed to regard their surroundings as safe. She leaned closer to Seokjin, gesturing him forward with her hand.

“One of my friends heard at the market the Bangtan Four has taken one of the eastern provinces, Gangwon. They have a huge army and are marching south next,” Jiyeon whispered. She leaned back and shrugged her shoulders. “But that’s just what I’ve heard, Your Highness. I mean, the king wouldn’t be celebrating with a banquet if it were true, would he?”

Seokjin blinked and waved his hand. “Yes, you’re right. Why would he celebrate if it were true?”

Because he’s mad.

“Thank you very much, Miss Jiyeon,” Seokjin took her hand in his own, patting it, and beamed at her. Her friends squealed, and Jiyeon herself turned an alarming shade of red, stuttering out pleasantries. “I won’t forgive the help you’ve given me today.”

Seokjin still heard their squealing even as he left them, entering another hall, and the prince allowed a small laugh to escape him. He filed the maid’s information away, seeking to do some further investigation later. He still had to finish his original objective.

It had been a while since he'd visited, but the servants in the kitchens greeted him warmly as if he had never left.

"Ah, Prince Seokjin!" the head cook exclaimed. "How nice of you to come!"

The kitchen was busier than usual, servants bustling around in a flurry of colors, the banging of pots and pans ringing as food sizzled and steamed. They were preparing for something important, but Seokjin would hear confirmation from the servant's lips before he affirmed his suspicions.

A middle-aged alpha who passed by caught sight of Seokjin and let out a deep sigh, shaking her head.

"Today's not a good day for a lesson, my prince," his mentor reluctantly admitted. She blew away the gray, curly strand of hair that dangled in front of her face with a puff of air, as her hands were busy with several baskets of vegetables.

"That's fine, Daena," Seokjin shrugged his shoulders. He rolled up his sleeves. "I can help if you'd like."

Daena set her baskets on a table, then picked up one of the kitchen towels. She fixed Seokjin with a look and snapped her towel in his direction, clicking her tongue. "Oh, you! What trouble do you think we'd be in, if we let the Crown Prince himself prepare his own banquet feast? I, for one, don't like getting my behind beaten."

"Banquet?" Seokjin repeated. The maid's words held truth then, and the bustling of the kitchens was for the rumored occasion.

At a time like this? If the maid was right about the banquet, it was likely that she was right about the Bangtan Four. Then it was as she said. Why would the king celebrate when the rebels made gains against him?

"It's going to be such a grand feast," one passing servant sighed. "All of the king's generals and advisers will be there! And the servants have been promised a taste of the wine! Wine, can you believe it?"

Daena nodded her head, agreeing with the other woman's words. "The king supposedly has some big announcement to make at the banquet regarding you. Don't you know?"

There's a lot of things I don't know. Too many things that no one has thought to tell me.

The phoenix on Seokjin's shoulder flared to life. The kitchen seemed to quiet, and it felt as if there were hundreds of eyes on him, eager and ready for their crown prince to impart his own weakness, his lack of knowledge. The familiarity of the servants here was well-placed, an attempt to lower Seokjin's guard and prod for more information. The price for his cooking lessons had been that he would forever be watched by his father's spies. It was a price he'd already been paying since the day he was born, an easy trade for the omega to make.

Seokjin smacked his head lightly. "Ah, of course!" he lied. "How could I have forgotten! I've been so absent minded lately."

Let them think he knew. Let them scurry back to their true masters with his lies. Seokjin couldn't afford to confide his ignorance in them. It was better for the kitchen servants to think he was ahead of his enemies rather than two paces behind like he was.

"You've always been absent minded, my prince," his mentor huffed, wagging a spoon at him. Her

eyes were narrowed and calculating, though, and Seokjin recognized it as one of her tells.

“Well, I’ll leave you alone. It seems I’m just getting in the way here. Besides, I have my own preparations to attend to,” Seokjin smiled secretively.

I have to figure out what the fuck is going on around here.

Daena rolled her eyes. “You should’ve done that in the first place!” she cried.

The kitchen came back to life once Seokjin announced his intention to leave, the busy sounds and movement returning, and the phoenix on his back quieted, no longer burning his skin. He waved to the alpha as he made his exit, calling to her.

“I’ll come visit soon, Daena!”

Daena just shook her head at him fondly. “Of course, my prince,” she murmured. “I count on it.”

Seokjin had made it a few paces outside of the kitchens when he unexpectedly ran into one of the servants. A brief sound escaped him, the collision having done little to actually harm him and more to surprise him. He reached out to steady the servant who’d almost bowled him over. Seokjin’s mouth nearly dropped in shock at the sight of her.

It was the girl who’d been employed in his household, Jisoo. She ducked her head, the contents of the large basket she carried nearly spilling over as she bowed. “Your Highness,” she greeted breathlessly, hurrying to steady her basket. “Forgive me!”

Seokjin frowned. “What are you doing in the kitchens? Weren’t you told to serve me?”

The girl shifted from one foot to the other, looking at the floor nervously. “Jae placed me here, Your Highness. Said you wanted me out of the way.”

Seokjin almost scoffed. Jae knew of Seokjin’s visits to the kitchens, and yet he put the girl here anyways, where she was likely to run into Seokjin eventually. It was like the older omega was trying to annoy him. The prince glanced at her basket and raised an eyebrow. It seemed as though there was something brown inside, barely concealed by a white cloth.

“What are you carrying?” he asked, hand moving to pull the cloth back. The girl pulled the basket out of his reach before he could.

Seokjin narrowed his eyes, which elicited a whimper from the girl. Her reluctance to let him see the contents of the basket was suspicious.

“Hand it over,” he commanded.

The girl’s arms had started to shake, but her mouth was set in a firm line. Seokjin moved closer, and the girl took a step back.

“I won’t ask again,” he warned.

Tears started to leak out of Jisoo’s eyes. She seemed to be coming to terms with something, perhaps weighing her options. Whatever it was, it didn’t weigh in her favor as she slowly, ever so slowly handed the basket over to the prince. It was rather heavy, Seokjin noted, taking it in his own hands. He flung the white cloth on top aside to get a good look at what was inside.

“Beans?” Seokjin said in disbelief. He dug his hand in the basket and ran it through, the beans

spilling off his hands easily. It was rather disappointing. Seokjin expected something sinister to be waiting inside, or perhaps even a few stolen goods to be hiding within.

But it was just...beans.

“L-lord Min!” the girl finally stuttered out. “It came from Lord Min. He told me it was to be prepared for the banquet! That I wasn’t to let a single bean spill out. It’s supposed to be a surprise.”

Seokjin felt rather foolish now. He retracted his hand and jerked his head in the direction of the kitchens. “Fine, then,” he snapped. “Just finish your job and take them inside.”

The girl did as she bid and disappeared, but another annoyance rose to the occasion and took her place. Seokjin heard the alpha before he saw them, his loud guffaw painful to Seokjin’s ears.

“The Crown Prince, scared of a few beans? I never thought I would see the day.”

It was the Mun heir, Kai. All Seokjin could feel was dread at the sight of him. He was pleasant enough to look at, taking after his omega father’s fine features, but once he opened his ungodly mouth, any goodwill towards him vanished. Instead of taking after Lord Mun in character as well, he had instead favored his other father, General Mun, and been cursed with less desirable traits: rude, arrogant, and loud.

“Kai,” Seokjin greeted, as not acknowledging the alpha would only start a fight Seokjin didn’t have time to partake in. Just saying his name made Seokjin want to puke. “This is the third time we’ve run into each other this week. Should I be worried you’ve started to stalk me?”

Kai swept his hand through his hair and smiled in a way he most likely thought was rather charming. “Prince Seokjin, you’re so hilarious! Since when did a simple man’s admiration become stalking?”

Seokjin stared at him blankly. “Since you started to leave unwanted gifts outside my room every morning,” he explained, voice dry.

Kai looked rather confused now, as if Seokjin was the one talking nonsense and acting strange. “What? I thought we talked about this. Don’t you remember?”

Seokjin merely tilted his head to the side. “I don’t care to play guessing games with you. Now, if you’ll excuse me.”

The prince brushed by Kai without a second thought, but the alpha caught him by the arm. The action had too much familiarity behind it. A dull aching began to throb in Seokjin’s head at the alpha’s touch, flashes of colors and sounds invading his senses, but he jerked himself away and the memories vanished.

“You forget yourself,” Seokjin hissed warningly. “What makes you think you can touch me?”

Kai seemed genuinely hurt. He opened his mouth, most likely ready to spout out some nonsense, but the sound of hurried footsteps approaching had the both of them pausing. Kai’s valet came storming down the hall, calling his master’s name.

“Young Master Kai!” the servant panted, coming to a stop before Seokjin and Kai. “You must come quick!”

“What is it? Didn’t I tell you not to bother me?” Kai huffed, annoyed as he turned away from his personal servant.

“The king is calling for all nobles and their household servants to appear in the throne room,” the servant recited.

“What does he want?” Seokjin questioned.

The servant seemed to just now notice the prince’s presence and he bowed deeply, apologizing for not greeting Seokjin. The prince impatiently waved his apologies aside and urged him to tell of the details behind the king’s summons.

“A group of servants have been caught telling lies about the king,” the servant cleared his throat. “They’re to be punished for treason in front of the whole court.”

Ah, so it was another posturing event. Just a few days ago, Seokjin and other nobles had had to attend the whipping of the servants who uttered Lady Hae’s rumor. Now it seemed other servants were being punished for the most recent Bangtan rumor that Seokjin had overheard. More harshly, however, if the mention of “treason” meant anything.

“Well,” Seokjin drawled, “I suppose we have no choice but to attend, yes?”

Seokjin had witnessed his father’s public penalties since he was nine. He himself had even been the accused in some incidents, punished for having snuck away from his tutors or mouthed off to someone above him. He wondered if his father regretted those beatings now, if only because the scars that marred Seokjin’s decidedly omega body made him less valuable to any potential mate.

The prince would not be intimidated by something he’d endured hundreds of times. Though they were gruesome as always, Seokjin wouldn’t allow himself to waver in face of the punishments doled out.

There was only one lone figure they were bringing to justice when Seokjin arrived at the throne room. Perhaps they were the mole, or even the ringleader of all the gossip. Whatever the case, one girl had been singled out of all the rest to stand-rather, kneel-at her mock trial. The servant cut a rather striking image in Seokjin’s mind, broken and bowed as the crowds around her tittered and jeered.

This is the king’s justice, Seokjin thought as he took his place before the king’s throne. The urge to shake his head was almost too great. *Justice for the truths spread by palace maids.*

The king’s eyes were glazed over in his usual madness, his mouth torn open into a nasty snarl. “My heir!” he spat. “Finally joining us. It seems you and Kai both have at last decided to grace us with your presence.”

His father’s eyes crinkled, as if he was amused by his own words, and he stroked his beard. He moved on from the subject of Seokjin soon enough, most likely wanting to avoid any thought whatsoever of his eldest son. “Now that everyone is finally gathered, shall we begin the punishments?”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” the entire court chimed.

“These traitors have brought slander into the palace walls, my own home!” Seokjin’s father huffed. “The palace should be the safest place for a king, and yet I find myself attacked at every turn! The lies of a few become the lies of many. If we do not pluck the bad fruit from the barrel, soon all of the good fruit will spoil as well!”

“These whores and spies seek to sully the Kim name, to weaken the grip that I have on this

country! I will make it clear here and now, I won't allow such insolence!"

Seokjin chose to glance at the girl. He expected it to be one of Lady Hae's old servants; perhaps even one of the water maidens who did the laundry. Seokjin was not prepared to recognize the broken girl before him, to place a name to a face.

"Prince Seokjin," the servant whispered upon meeting his eyes. She couldn't have been tortured for too long. He'd seen her less than an hour ago, and she'd been giggling and smiling, as radiant as a young girl should be.

"Miss Jiyeon," Seokjin greeted, voice far too hoarse for his liking. The entire court went quiet around him, giving even the king pause as his own son recognized the traitor standing trial.

The girl's face was a bloody, swollen mess. A cut to her left eye had closed it forever, and her nose was broken and mangled. Seokjin was surprised that she could even speak. Her right eye pleaded with him, blurry with tears.

The king's silence, as usual, did not last long.

"Do you know this girl, boy?" the king growled. "This *traitor*?"

The truth was that he didn't. He only met her in passing, and even then he only knew her name, nothing of where she came from or who she was. As he looked at her, though, shaking and shivering in front of the whole court with no allies to call her own, he wanted to lie for her.

"She was one of my servants," Seokjin said, never taking his eyes off the servant. The crowd gasped in horror. Perhaps they thought he was admitting to treason as well. Seokjin could only wonder on what it was his father hoped to do to this girl. Did he mean to take her right here, in front of all his officials, or would he have her pulled apart by horses come morning?

Seokjin didn't want to have to witness that; he'd prevent it if he could.

The king scoffed at Seokjin's words. "She never once mentioned you. The girl said she was a maid for Lord Sam's daughter. "

Not even our exchange in the halls? Was her infatuation that great?

"How interesting!" Adviser Paek chimed in. "It seems as though one of you is lying."

Seokjin glanced at the king, then back to the girl, whose shoulders began to shake. For some reason, Yoongi's voice echoed in his head.

I myself have found that loyalty is a very rare trait to have.

Loyalty. For what? Seokjin dismissed the thought as quickly as it came. He had done nothing for this girl, and yet she had kept her mouth closed in regards to their exchange, even under duress. Perhaps she just hadn't thought it important enough to mention to her torturers.

Seokjin let out a sigh. "It shames me to admit this, but Jiyeon is one of my own. I planted her in Lord Sam's household in the hopes that I could gather some information."

Lord Sam's face flushed as he exclaimed, "A spy? In my own household? What have I ever done to warrant such suspicion, my king?"

The prince fixed Lord Sam with a look. "Oh, please! Don't act so offended, Lord Sam. Everyone

here knows that your dealings with Qing officials are less than pure.”

Sam retreated at this accusation, going pale and losing all steam. As he didn't voice his indignation a second time, the king ignored it. He was eerily calm for a man who had just been ranting and raving about the treasonous lies of traitors. He chose instead to stare at Seokjin, narrowing his eyes.

“Are you admitting to treason, Kim Seokjin?” the king asked, voice cold and distant.

Seokjin shook his head, mouth suddenly dry. “I will admit that I have failed, Father, but only in the duties of a master. I cannot always monitor what my servants say every hour of every day, but I should have controlled them better. Perhaps I should've instilled more discipline in my household.”

“Believe me, my king,” Seokjin wet his lips, “if I had known what the girl was saying, she would already be dead. What I'm getting at is a request. One in which you allow me take responsibility for my wayward servant and wipe my hands clean of this matter.”

The king was pleased with this. He nodded his head. “You will deal with it, boy?”

Seokjin swallowed, and his chest felt so very tight. It was like the first time he was watched an execution, the same feelings he'd gotten when he presented. All of those emotions were rolled into one chaotic mess. *I'm disgusted with my father, but even more disgusted with myself.* He knew what it was the king referred to.

“I will deal with it the way you've taught me how, Father,” he promised.

The king seemed giddy, like a child ready to receive a new toy. “Go on, then. Don't keep the crowd waiting,” he urged, voice filled with mirth.

Seokjin caught Jiyeon's gaze again. There was only one service that Seokjin could do for her now. He gestured to one of the guards to come forward, and once he did, Seokjin drew his sword forth. Seokjin was nowhere near the level of a swordsman, but the king had made sure his son could at least handle a blade.

It's better that it be quick, Seokjin reasoned. She was just a palace maid, a naive pawn in the grand scheme of things. The world would not miss Jiyeon once she was gone, would not mind if she suffered until her last breathe. It was Seokjin who didn't want her to suffer anymore than she had.

He approached her with a smile and took her gnarled, bleeding hand in his own. “Oh, Jiyeon,” he murmured. “What have they done to you?”

The girl only cried harder at his words. “P-prince Seokjin, I'm s-sorry,” she babbled.

“Please. You have nothing to be sorry for. It seems like I owe you a greater debt than you realize,” his voice was barely a whisper, quiet enough so only Jiyeon could hear. “I'm going to end this, alright? Can you do something for me, one last favor?”

Jiyeon nodded.

“Close your eyes,” he murmured.

Her right eye slowly slid shut, never to open again. Seokjin readied the sword in his hands, his grip firm and steady, and swung. The nobles around him all collectively gasped, as if they hadn't really thought Seokjin would fulfill his promise to see the execution through. He was a willowy thing in their eyes, and never one to get his own hands dirty. Yet the blade struck true.

Seokjin shut his own eyes and dropped his bloody sword to the floor with a clatter, which covered the dull thud of Jiyeon's head falling to the ground. He refused to look at her, his hands clenched tight into fists as he turned to face the throne.

Idiot, Seokjin chided himself. He felt their cold stares picking at him as he pulled down his mask, all of them readying their own blades. Seokjin could not blame them. He was the one who laid his weakness bare for all to see. Now he could only wait to see what rumors and plans they would start. He'd made himself an easy target with such foolish sentimentality.

It wouldn't happen again.

"I hope that I have rectified my mistake, Father," Seokjin bowed his head. "When any servant of mine utters such filthy lies again, they will be met with the same fate as this one."

The king's dark eyes were gleaming. "There were other servants found guilty of treason. Can I presume they were yours as well?"

"She was the only one," Seokjin said dully. "I had no others."

For a moment, Seokjin worried it would not be enough to please the king. He was eerily silent for what seemed like an eternity. Would Seokjin have to desecrate Jiyeon's corpse before his father was satisfied? If so, would he be able to? *No*, the answer came to him immediately. *I'd refuse that at least*. Eventually, his father's cruel laughter rang throughout the throne room, and a quiet sigh of relief escaped Seokjin.

The king gazed out at the crowd of officials rather haughtily as he addressed them. "Then it's all good and done! Did you all see? My son is a true Kim, a born killer. I've taught him well, have I not?"

Seokjin resumed his place at the foot of the throne, where the prince should be, as the other nobles murmured their assent. One of his father's valets offered a handkerchief for Seokjin to wipe his hands clean of Jiyeon's blood. He refused it. The doors to throne room opened, and more servants were brought forth. None were as young as Jiyeon. Some were stable hands, others were palace maids or water maidens. All of them were guilty of the same crime: slander against the crown. They took Jiyeon's place before the king, who commanded his guards to follow through with, as he declared it, Prince Seokjin's signature brand of punishment: a simple beheading.

When the heads of the traitors rolled to a stop at his feet, specks of blood having splattered so far as to dirty his face, Seokjin never once so much as blinked.

Chapter End Notes

i promise ya'll, it may seem like a lot of crap is going on but it's all important and the conspiracy that ties it together is going to be revealed around chapter three and four-ish??? lol then we gonna get into MORE conspiracies YEET

place your votes on which OCs are a) yoongi's hoes b) the king's hoes and c) who is going to survive the Bangtan Four's rebellion

also place your votes on who the bangtan four might be...seokjin definitely ain't one of them, that leaves only six to guess from LOL wonder who it is.... :))) i didn't make it hard it's not a trick lol

find me on [tumblr](#) and [twitter](#)

The Friendly Cup

Chapter Summary

Slowly, ever so slowly, Seokjin pieces it together all too late.

Chapter Notes

TW: minor character death

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

When everything was all said and done, Seokjin went about his day as usual. He attended lunch with his father and Adviser Paek, listened to several lesser nobles come crying to him about their own problems, and read books. Later that day, though, before he was to have supper, Seokjin wrote a letter to Taehyung. He warned his brother to stay far away from the palace in the future, even if that meant he had to ignore the summons of a king. A storm was brewing around the palace, seeping passed its walls day by day, and Seokjin didn't want his brother in the middle of it. He decided to trust his message in a bird, something that could not be bought from him. It would be quicker too. The banquet was set for the day after tomorrow, so the message should get to Taehyung soon enough.

The Kim family had begun to keep birds around a hundred years ago, after one king off of his rocker had decided that it was their duty as "phoenixes", the king birds, to take care of all the other lesser birds. The aviary had eventually transformed into a messaging center of sorts when another king's fool had taught several birds to deliver messages. The practice of using their birds to carry messages evolved from there, and the rest was history.

To the prince's surprise, Yoongi was already in the aviary, sending a message of his own. A large, gorgeous brown falcon perched on his arm. Yoongi cooed at it gently, stroking its lovely feathers. He didn't seem to be aware of Seokjin's presence.

"Sending a letter back home?" Seokjin spoke up.

Yoongi nearly jumped. "Seokjin?" he spluttered, the falcon squawking in protest at his sudden, jerky movements.

The prince smiled and approached slowly. "Sorry I startled you. Is he yours?"

The other omega relaxed and so did the bird, both of them settling in near sync. "He belongs to a friend of mine," Yoongi admitted. "We send each other letters every now and then."

Seokjin hadn't thought Yoongi had any friends. The prince glanced at the letter he held in his outstretched hand. He'd only caught sight of a symbol on it, the outline of a rectangle, before Yoongi crumpled it.

"He keeps me up-to-date on what's happening on the estate. Every time my uncle misplaces

another portion of my inheritance, I hear about it,” Yoongi continued, a bite to his voice. He opened one of the cages and urged the falcon to enter. It was only after much coaxing and the promise of several mice that the bird obeyed.

“It’s frustrating,” Seokjin noted. “Not being able to do anything.”

He picked one of the birds—a sleek, small carrier pigeon—and sent his own message off with her.

Though Seokjin himself was not a hostage like Yoongi was, confined to the palace grounds and virtually ignored like the plague, he still felt the same listlessness as Yoongi. Seokjin could bite back at the nobles all he wanted, but when it came to the person he really wanted to hurt, he couldn’t so much as touch him.

Yoongi’s features softened. “I wasn’t there to see it—your father *still* doesn’t allow me to attend court—but I heard of it. I’m truly sorry. To lose one of your own like that...”

Seokjin shrugged his shoulders, feigning indifference. The news had spread like wildfire; how could it not when the entirety of the court was in attendance? He should’ve known Yoongi would have heard of it as well.

“I wanted to do it—no, I needed to. No one else would have given a death as painless,” the prince explained. He tried not to think of it even as he spoke of it. He swallowed the lump that was building in his throat.

“She was just a girl.”

Yoongi looked at Seokjin then, almost as if he were seeing him for the first time. “I’m sure that’s not the worst you’ve seen, the worst you’ve had to do at your father’s behest?” he said it cautiously.

Seokjin only smiled, and the action felt so very wrong on his face, cut out and pasted on crooked. His fingers twitched, feeling like they were still wet with blood.

“The youngest one,” the prince said, voice faint. “Jiyeon was...the youngest casualty that I’ve been responsible for. I hadn’t even known we had maids that young.”

“How old was she?” Yoongi dared to ask.

“Thirteen,” it felt like sandpaper in his mouth just to say it. She’d looked young, of course she had, but she’d been rather tall and more daring than most girls her age. Seokjin had been shocked when the palace records revealed her actual age. He shook his head.

“Ah, I feel like I’m going crazy!” he laughed. “Things are just so stressful lately. I feel like my handsome face will have ten new wrinkles by the end of this week.”

Yoongi’s nose twitched, and a worried frown etched itself on his face, but he said no more on the topic. He still held the crumpled message in his hand, and Seokjin noticed him stuff it into the sleeves of his robes. Yoongi, being a noble omega known to the public, had no choice but to wear a decorated, heavy hanbok wherever he went, though Seokjin noticed he kept some of his individuality with the dark hues he was allowed to choose.

“I’m sure you’ll be able to unwind at the banquet, yes? I’ve heard it will be an unforgettable event,” Yoongi offered, allowing an easy transition from the heavy topic Seokjin wanted to avoid.

Seokjin raised his brows. “Well, I didn’t think it would be that memorable, but...to each their own.

Will you be allowed to attend? I noticed you provided for the menu.”

Yoongi tensed, seeming to hunch inwards on himself. “You saw?”

“Really, Yoongi?” Seokjin chided, a little exasperated. “Beans? Of all the things!”

The omega relaxed, but gave Seokjin an annoyed look anyways. “There’s nothing wrong with beans,” he protested. “They’re a surprise for the king. They taste good, and they’re easy to make.”

The prince rolled his eyes. “Easy to make? I thought this was supposed to be an ‘unforgettable banquet’! Though I suppose it will be unforgettable if the courses are as dismal as they seem to be.”

Yoongi huffed and folded his arms over his chest. He muttered something about fancy dinners and ungrateful royalty that Seokjin barely caught. His falcon made another loud squawking noise, and Yoongi’s attention was drawn away.

“What, are you still hungry?” he asked the bird, voice turning soft.

Seokjin almost left then, as it seemed like a good time to make his exit. He’d already spent enough time playing around; he should’ve been at a dinner by now. But he caught the sudden tightness to Yoongi’s jaw, the almost aching tenderness in the way he reached a hand out to the bird through the cage. His other hand he guarded closely, perhaps the sleeve that hid the letter from home.

“I never did ask,” Seokjin began softly. “What’s his name?”

Yoongi paused for a moment, as if he were considering whether to tell Seokjin or not, which was ridiculous. It was just a bird’s name, right? Seokjin didn’t see the big deal in it. *But*, Seokjin thought, *perhaps he keeps the name close, like a secret wish or a memory he doesn’t want to share, for fear others may spoil it.*

“Hope,” Yoongi finally admitted, voice strained. “His name is Hope.”

The Bangtan Four were indeed a very serious threat now. Before, Seokjin could use rumors of them in his own plans, but now he would not dare to even broach the subject of them. Doing so might link him to treason, as he had witnessed just this morning.

There was only one faction, one person in particular, who Seokjin knew was allowed free reign in matters of speech. Seokjin had called ahead to invite himself to dinner with the king’s right hand, knowing that if he wanted to gain any information from now, he would have to do so through him. The realization had left a sour taste in his mouth, but there was nothing he could do about it.

“Oh, Lady Paek,” Seokjin hummed. He took a stab at the meat on his plate, dark red leaking out from the action. The sight of it made Seokjin, as someone who hadn’t been feeling his best these last few days, nearly sick.

“I’ve never tasted pork as fresh as this! Tell me, did your servants cook it over a fire the size of my fist?”

Lady Paek gave him a nasty smile in return. “Your Highness!” she cooed. “You’re too kind. I suppose it’s normal for you to know how we prepare our food. After all, we get most of our recipes from your household.”

Seokjin put a hand to his heart. “I’m *flattered*,” he stressed.

Adviser Paek watched all of this with a rather forlorn expression, swirling his glass of wine and sighing. Seokjin still couldn’t decide if he was exasperated with the both of them or feeling left out that he wasn’t let included in their verbal sparring. He believed it was the latter.

While the prince absolutely, under no circumstances trusted Adviser Paek, he knew where the old man stood. He was true to the crown above all else, but he wasn’t a fanatic like the king. He was scheming and ambitious, but not power hungry. How could he be? There was not much higher one could reach than being the king’s sole impulse control.

“Dear,” Adviser Paek suddenly spoke, fixing Lady Paek with a look. “Would you be so kind as to check on the dessert?”

Lady Paek nodded her head and did just that. Seokjin was surprised she hadn’t made a fuss at the quick dismissal, but perhaps she was used to it. She’d been married to Adviser Paek for forty years, after all.

The adviser set his wine glass down and folded up his napkin, tossing it onto the table. “Did you know, Seokjin, that up until today, I thought the mole was you?”

The prince nearly choked on his noodles, the sudden heavy topic a shock to him. He patted his chest lightly, swallowing, and regained his composure. “Me? A mole? We haven’t even gotten to dessert and you’re accusing me of treason?”

“I’m not accusing you, my prince,” Adviser Paek argued, shaking his head. “I’m just saying that I’ve thought you capable of it.”

Seokjin pretended to look indignant, raising his brows and twisting his mouth in outrage. Paek didn’t fall for it. The old man smiled dangerously, his eyes glinting. “I know you, Seokjin. I was there when you were born, when you took your first steps and held your first sword. And when you were nine, when the king had the backs of your legs beaten bloody for talking back to a tutor, I saw the first shadows of hate start to spread in those dark eyes of yours.”

This was how Paek wanted to play the game then, with pretenses and acts pushed aside for the knitty gritty truth of it all. An expressionless mask dropped over the prince’s features before he could dare to smile. How refreshing.

“I am no fan of the king,” Seokjin’s voice was soft, almost like silk. “Just like the rest of this kingdom. Tell me, does the king dare to kill the country that gives him his own reason for existing?”

“He would be king of ash and rubble,” Paek admitted, inclining his head. “When even the common people have the gall to rise against you, that’s the only way to purge the rot. Or so he says.”

Seokjin leaned back. “Spoken like a true madman.”

He felt himself smile and dared to ask. “What changed your mind about me being the mole?”

“I realized that if you were to go against the king, it would be less showy than all of this. No open rebellion and certainly no organization of peasants to take over the country. You’d be much quieter, much sneakier about it. Why, if you were committing treason, I wouldn’t even realize what was happening until after we already put a crown atop your head.”

Paek was spot on, and Seokjin had to incline his head, respecting the scheming snake a little more in that moment. Seokjin was still legally next in line for the throne, despite his status as an omega. He didn't need to rely on such flashy, bloody methods to take the throne. An operation such as the Bangtan Four's was beneath him.

"The Bangtan situation is far worse than we feared," the adviser sighed, fidgeting with one of the gaudy rings on his hands. "I suppose he has a right to be mad, in a situation like this."

The prince couldn't help but laugh. "You think he has a right to be mad all the time! After all, it gives you more power if he's not sane."

"This is different," Adviser Paek insisted. "We're not talking about a passing fancy for a court lady that has him off his rocker, but an *open rebellion*. Even I fear the king in this."

You have no one but yourself to blame for this, Seokjin thought but did not say. You are the one who let him decline so fast, who encouraged the codependent dynamic between you both. If I didn't have to be in this mess as well, I would let you reap what you sowed.

"Is it true, then, that the Bangtan Four have taken Gangwon?"

"Yes," Paek admitted. "Their forces grow larger by the day, joined by commoners they whip into shape at the drop of a hat. It seems like a sickness of sorts or a spell, with how so many people fall in with them so quick."

Seokjin tapped his fingers on the table. "Where do they march next? South? Or west, to the capital, where we sit trying to make Bangtan Four go away by cutting the heads off of servants who so much as hear of their existence?"

"My scouts tell me the bulk of their force has gone south," Paek informed Seokjin, ignoring his snide remark. "But the people outside the palace have heard of them already. They write the rebels' symbol on flags and fly them high, paint them on shops and embroider it on their clothes. Imagine, strutting around with two rectangles on your shirt, acting as if you're really helping the resistance with that!"

"It would be easy to take the city, then," Seokjin noted, a chill running up his spine at the thought. How long would it take? An hour? A few minutes? "The people would probably give them rooms to sleep in and food to eat for no charge."

"Now you see why I am so worried," Adviser Paek rested his balding head against his chair, sighing yet again and folding his hands over his stomach.

Seokjin paused for a moment, lips twisting into a frown. "Do you have any person in mind for the mole? You must have some idea, now that I'm off your list."

Paek tilted his head to the side. "Yes, I suppose I do. Though I believe they could be closer to you than you think, Prince Seokjin. How many would you say you are close to in this palace? Who do you trust?"

That was laughable. Seokjin answered easily, "No one."

"A smart answer," Paek praised. "But is it the truth?"

Seokjin paused, frowning. "What do you mean?"

"I've noticed something about you, Seokjin. You see, the court likes to call you the Serene Prince

on your good days. The Ice Prince on your bad ones. Very nice nicknames. Both of them make you seem...untouchable, unmoving. Before today, perhaps I would have agreed with that sentiment.”

“And now?” Seokjin prodded, something unpleasant building in his gut.

Paek smiled. “Now I see that it’s all a front. You are not the cold, aloof person you pretend to be. Indifferent people do not share their already dismal allowance with their disgraced brother’s estate, nor do they risk themselves in taking responsibility for a servant not their own.”

Seokjin’s hands clenched around his armrests to stop them from shaking. “What are you getting at, Adviser Paek?” he spat.

“Only that you are not as unfeeling as you like to think. You should be careful, my prince. I worry you’ve already trusted your heart to those who plan to do it harm.”

The old man acted like he knew everything there was to know about Seokjin, like he could see into his heart and read his thoughts, pick them apart with just a glance and untangle the messes that not even Seokjin could begin to fathom. It was annoying.

“Like who?” Seokjin scoffed. “You think I don’t know there are spies watching me everywhere? How could I trust a single person in a place as truly awful as this, knowing what I know and seeing what they do?”

Adviser Paek paused at this, and when he spoke, it was of a different topic. “Do you still take your suppressants?”

The prince faltered, tension unrolling from his shoulders as his hands fell limp at his side, all of the outrage leaving him in one blow. He felt self-conscious now, almost like a child being interrogated for breaking an expensive vase or plate.

“Of course. But what-”

“Who prepares them for you? Do you watch your servant’s every move as they make the tea for you?”

Seokjin was silent. He had watched in the beginning, if only to make sure that Jae would make it right. The process had been taught to Seokjin himself by Yoongi, and it was passed on to Jae, and then the other servants as needed. Anyone who made the tea bore a heavy burden on their shoulders, as it was said any modifications made to the prince’s most special, favorite teas would cost them not only their jobs, but their lives. Seokjin had thought that would be enough, so that’s why he did not watch anymore.

The prince swallowed. “They know better than to cross me.”

Adviser Paek rose an eyebrow. “Do they?” he asked. “Is that why you carry such a sweet smell beneath all of your masking scents as of late? Why your hair shines and your skin is so oily, just as Lady Paek’s was every week before one of her heats?”

Seokjin’s heart constricted in his chest, nearly halting right then and there. “Stop,” his voice faltered, carrying none of the strength he tried to show. “You don’t know what you’re talking about. You’re lying.”

The old man sighed and looked away. “Then watch your servants make your tea tomorrow, Seokjin. You’ll see the truth of my words.”

Seokjin could hardly sleep that night, his mind running over his interaction with Adviser Paek again and again and again. He'd visited Taehyung not even a week ago, and his scent was already dulling. Except this time, he was starting to smell like something else as well. The suppressants he was taking should've prevented that. Yoongi had even promised them to be stronger than the last. Seokjin's hands shook at the thought. He almost didn't want to go to sleep, for fear that when he woke, he'd have turned into a wanton mess of pheromones and slick overnight.

Adviser Paek could be lying, trying to throw Seokjin off of his game, but for what reason did the old man have to lie about Seokjin's scent? He'd helped the king hide Seokjin's secret for years; there was no way he'd want it revealed now of all times.

Somehow Seokjin did sleep, but his dreams were filled with fire demons and headless servants. He pictured his own servants laughing at him as they dropped teaspoons of arsenic in his tea. "Foolish, omega prince," they jeered. "Didn't you ever think to check?"

He could feel it burn him even now as they forced the hot tea down his throat, scorching his throat until he couldn't so much as breathe. When Seokjin did wake, his hand immediately drifted down to check for any wetness, but he was dry. He sniffed the air as well, trying to catch the sweet scent Paek referred to, but couldn't smell anything different.

"Jae," he called, summoning the servant. He had to force his voice not to tremble. "Have my tea prepared as usual."

Jae bowed. "Of course, Your Highness. I shall pass the order along. Do you need help with your clothes? Today is the day of the banquet after all."

"No," Seokjin snapped. "Just leave me for now."

The older omega frowned, eyebrows furrowing at Seokjin's short temper, but obeyed. Once he was gone, Seokjin waited several minutes before he made his way to his sitting room, where the tea was usually prepared. He paused outside the door. Would everything be in order, with nothing amiss? Or would Adviser Paek be proven right? There was only one way for Seokjin to find out. His hand did not shake as he slid the door open.

When he saw who it was that was preparing his tea, he clenched the wooden panel of the door so tightly that it groaned in protest. Red overtook his vision, so powerful he felt himself tremble not from fear, but rage.

"You!" he hissed. "What in the hell are you doing here?"

Jisoo's hand froze in mid air before it could dump the tea leaves inside the pot, and she looked like a frightened fawn, eyes wide and teary. "Y-your Highness?" she stuttered.

How long had Jisoo been employed in his household? How long had she been messing with his dosage of suppressants? Seokjin was so furious that his anger couldn't be contained, lest he crack at the pressure of keeping it inside.

Seokjin moved as if controlled by some other power, striding over to the girl with quick, heavy steps. He struck her across the face, the sound of it a solid crack, hard enough that his own hand stung. The girl's head moved to the side, her mouth open in a silent sob. She just knelt there, shaking like a leaf.

"The tea! Who told you to make it? Who *let* you make it?"

"There was nobody else, Y-your Highness," she said quietly. "Jae told me to make it because

everyone is busy with the banquet preparations.”

Seokjin scoffed. “And where is Jae now? Let me guess, preparing for the banquet?”

The girl didn’t answer, so the prince continued. “Don’t think I don’t know what you are, girl. I see it now. You’re the one who’s been messing with my tea.”

Jisoo shook her head. “No, Your Highness!” she mumbled. “This is the first time. I haven’t done anything to it either! I promise! I just prepared it like Jae told me to!”

She seemed so earnest, eyes begging with him as she bowed her head. Seokjin stared at her, the girl who had almost cost him his life. “Guards!” he called.

“Your Highness! Please! Show mercy!”

“Were you there when I promised the king that any future treason from my household would be dealt with quickly?” Seokjin spat. “I butchered a girl younger than you that day. Why should I show mercy to you for going against orders when Jiyeon died for so much as opening her mouth?”

The girl began to openly sob now, hands covering her face as she rested her head against the floor. Seokjin’s rugs soaked up the tears. The guards arrived not a moment later. Seokjin pointed to Jisoo.

“Arrest her,” he ordered, “for going against royal orders. Have her executed within the hour.”

Jisoo let out a wail as she was dragged away, reminiscent of the scene from last week where Lady Hae made her own exit from court. This one had decidedly less decorum. He met Jisoo’s desperation with a stone mask, not one crack visible in his face.

He had no sympathy for rats.

Seokjin put in an immediate request for an investigation into his own household. Any servants who had been brought to him in the last month were let go, dispersed amongst other households or banished from the palace altogether. Seokjin’s wrath could not touch the other servant responsible, however, and so it soon fizzled out within the hour. Jae had left Jisoo alone with the tea in the first place, trusting the girl to the task when Seokjin had wanted nothing to do with her. The old omega was only put on temporary leave for his mistake, though by all rights he should be forced out of the palace. There was only one reason he was not.

Jae had nursed him when his mother was too weak to even dare and comforted him when the sweating sickness eventually took her. The day after Seokjin had presented as an omega, he’d discovered that the proof of his presentation, the bloodied clothes and bedsheet he’d stuck in one of his drawers, was missing. When asked of it, Jae had merely folded his wrinkled hands together and bowed.

“It’s all taken care of, my prince,” he said, smiling gently.

They never spoke of it again, each of them living in ignorance. Except Seokjin could no longer live that way, turning a blind eye to Jae’s true loyalties. Servants may have come and gone over the years, but Jae remained. Seokjin could look back on every important memory he had and see Jae there. Just as he could see Adviser Paek.

So it made sense that Adviser Paek would be the one to vouch for Jae, to keep him in Seokjin’s household where he could keep an eye on the prince.

Seokjin called in a favor from Lord Mun, asking for servants to attend him in the coming week it would take to absolve his own servants of guilt or find them guilty. Lord Mun graciously agreed, and Seokjin had foreign hands and eyes upon him as he dressed for the banquet. The servants from Lord Mun were rather well trained, neither too friendly nor too distant.

They brought forth red and orange silk from his closet to dress in, the material so slick that Seokjin felt it would slide right off of him. It was a ceremony after all. Seokjin was a natural beauty, so he didn't need to try too hard to look good.

He was escorted to the dining hall sooner than most other nobles. If Crown Prince Seokjin arrived late, it would be all they could chatter about the entire hour. All thoughts of gossip and impressions were thrown from his mind, however, once he glimpsed sight of the dining hall. The huge doors opened up to reveal a multitude of bright colors and tables covered in hundreds of different foods. Seokjin's mouth watered at the sight of it.

He resolved to look at the food later, instead inspecting those who were invited or looking for the absence of those who weren't. He noted almost immediately that Yoongi was missing. If the Min heir had been invited, he would have been one of the first to arrive. He was most likely banned from attending by the king. Yoongi was a hostage after all, and his presence at the king's palace was barely tolerated the way it was. Seokjin wasn't too surprised to see him banned from the banquet. *More like given an excuse not to come*, Seokjin thought bitterly. What he would do to spend this time curled up at Taehyung's house, listening to his brother's stories and sharing ones of his own. Instead Seokjin was stuck here, surrounded by vipers and pesky gnats.

He noticed that one annoyance was gone, for which he was grateful. Mun Kai was missing, perhaps off on some errand for his sire. His seat was usually between his two parents, Lord and General Mun, but there was no place reserved this time.

Kai had become unbearable in his stalking the last few days, leaving even more trinkets than usual for Seokjin as well as sappy love notes he'd copied from romance novels. His attempt at courting was rather awkward and messy. Seokjin would have to let the alpha down firmly when next he saw him.

Kai's father, upon seeing Seokjin glance in his direction, called him over. "Crown Prince! Come, come! Sit by my lord husband and I!"

The general was decked out in all of his shiny glory, a fearsome sight to behold. His armor was a clean silver, and he had medals adorned on his arms and chest. The Mun family sword, which would eventually pass onto Kai after the general's death, remained strapped to his chest. He sat beside his husband and mate Lord Mun, one of the few nobles Seokjin could stand.

Lord Mun was a fair omega, having retained most of his beauty against time's cruelty. Compared to his husband, he was dressed rather simply, but still elegantly, in a hanbok of navy blue and cream. Lord Mun was not like other court omegas in that he would not wear any jewelry; earrings, necklaces, and hairpins were all too gaudy for his tastes.

As the seat beside Lord Mun was occupied by Lord Sam, Seokjin had no choice but to sit by General Mun. This put him directly across from Adviser Paek, and at the left of the king, who sat above the table of nobles at his own throne. The king couldn't even grace his nobles with his presence at a banquet table.

Once Seokjin was seated, more nobles began to pour in, taking their place at the tables. Seokjin had time to take in the beautiful decorations, the golden streamers that hung from the rafters and the crimson lanterns that accompanied them. The throne room had a Kim-like glow to it, dyed in

his family's colors, regal and bright. Seokjin wondered briefly if his cousins and uncles who had perished so many years ago would think the same.

There were phoenixes made out of orange paper placed sparingly along the table, their black beaks vicious and sharp. They guarded the plentiful food before them as if it were their own offering.

As Seokjin started to inspect the food itself, he heard the giant doors to the dining room close shut. He glanced over to the door where the king sat on his golden throne, decked out in dark red and black. His father waved his hand. "Well, go on now. Eat!"

The nobles all glanced around nervously. Usually it was the king who ate first, but there was no table in front of him to eat off of. Seokjin finally made a move, scooping a heaping mound of noodles onto his plate. "It smells delicious," he praised. "I don't think I'll have any room for dessert."

The rest followed after that, deciding that if it was okay for their prince to eat before the king, then it was okay for them to eat as well. They all chattered and stuffed their faces, cheeks puffed out and voices muffled. Seokjin was unfortunate to have to keep up conversation with General Mun, who was all too eager to know if the king had delivered any word on Seokjin's future fiancée.

Seokjin picked at the chicken thigh on his plate, peeling the skin off of it. "His Majesty has had no time to worry about picking a mate for me. There's more pressing matters for him to mull over."

General Mun's eyes glinted. "Then there are no other offers, only the one that I proposed?"

The general knew Seokjin was an omega. His hopes for an engagement between the prince and his son Kai had been voiced rather loudly in the past. As long as Seokjin drew breath, however, there was no chance that would happen. He wouldn't let it. If anything, General Mun should be frightened at the thought of his heir marrying Seokjin, who was rumored to be cursed by the ghost of his first fiancée. This was due to Seokjin not having a good track record for engagements. He would admit that most of those failures had been his own fault. It was only the first one that had been an accident. Seokjin would take no credit for that one.

Seokjin smiled, a dangerous edge to it. "There are always other offers. It's just that the king and I are going to be sitting on them for a long time."

General Mun frowned. "You're not getting any younger," he started, probably ready to go on some helpful rant about settling down soon.

"Dear," Lord Mun chimed in, voice as sweet as honey. He offered a helping of kimchi to his husband. "Your favorite."

The general crumpled instantly, face softening as he almost started to glow. Whatever it was General Mun was going to say was erased from his mind completely as he leaned forward to eat the food offered to him by his mate. He closed his eyes and murmured appreciatively. Lord Mun winked at Seokjin discreetly, to which the prince had to grin.

With the general distracted, he was free to dig into his food, making the most out of this awful banquet. It was around the middle of the third course that the king rose from his gilded throne of gold, silencing the room as he stood before them all. A servant was ushered forth to bring a cup of something to the king. More servants came, each of them carrying jugs with which they poured over each and every noble's cup.

Seokjin gave his own cup a glance once it was filled, then brought it close to smell. Alcohol. So

this was the wine the servants had spoken of. Seokjin waited patiently, eagerly, for whatever big announcement the king was about to proclaim.

“I would like to give a toast,” the king rumbled, “so that I may honor you, my loyal subjects. To Lord Hae who oversees my fields in the south, Lord Sam who negotiates the trade with Qing, General Mun who leads my forces into battle, and Adviser Paek who presides over internal affairs. Even when the traitorous Min clan rose up against me and the Jeons refused to pay their taxes, you stood with me. Me, your one true king! To loyalty!”

His father jerked his cup up into the air, wine slopping out and spilling. The court followed, though their movements were much more controlled than the king. The king looked out at the crowd, squinting as if he was searching for someone he’d forgotten to address, when his eyes landed on Seokjin.

“To my son, Kim Seokjin,” the king announced, “may his future reign be more *fruitful* than my own.”

The king raised his cup in the direction of Seokjin. The prince lowered his head in response to his acknowledgement, hiding from the king’s surely mocking eyes. Seokjin met the gaze of General Mun instead, who looked at him meaningfully. The look sent Seokjin’s stomach tossing and turning in disgust. *Fruitful*. He almost instinctively clutched at his midsection. There were so many other ways his father could have worded that.

“And finally, to my great country, my kingdom which has stood for thousands upon thousands of years...may it prosper again for thousands of years to come!” the king finished. He lifted his cup of wine one final time and then brought it back for a long swig.

Again? That was rather strange wording. Seokjin half-heartedly murmured his own assent, voice joining the crowd which hurraled at the king’s words. How easy it was for them to forget that they dined with a monster, that in a few weeks all of their wealth and power could be gone if they didn’t get off of their asses and do something about the Bangtan rebels.

All of them were more concerned with getting drunk and celebrating, instead of facing the problem that hung like a cloud over the room. Seokjin wanted to roll his eyes. Instead, he raised his cup to his lips, ready to take a sip like all the others, when he paused.

Something wasn’t right. That couldn’t be it. Where was the big announcement, the reason Yoongi had declared the banquet to be an unforgettable occasion?

The clarity hit him in that moment, clear as day.

“*I promise! I just prepared it like Jae told me to!*” The girl, for all his suspicions, had seemed remarkably earnest in that moment, and if she hadn’t messed with the tea when she prepared it ...it had been tampered with before it made its way to Seokjin.

“*Do you still take your suppressants?*” The continued dulling of his scent, even after Yoongi had been responsible for providing him with new suppressants a week before.

He’d only caught sight of a symbol on Yoongi’s letter, the outline of a rectangle, before the Min heir crumpled it. The Bangtan Four, he realized, feeling quite sick. That must be their symbol. Now that he recognized it, he remembered Paek describing something similar to him.

If Yoongi was truly a part of the Bangtan rebels, if he’d been sabotaging Seokjin all along, then he must have reason for not attending this banquet, the event he’d considered unforgettable. It was the

last piece of the puzzle, the reason Seokjin was so hesitant to partake in the wine. He thought of every action, every word and mention of Yoongi over these last few weeks, reanalyzing anything that stood out.

He remembered the beans.

“Lord Min told me to take the beans here.” The beans for the celebration? Where were they now? Seokjin’s eyes scanned the hundreds of plates before him, but he saw no trace of them. Yoongi had been excused from the banquet by the king personally, and his beans—which were supposed to be a surprise for the king—were nowhere in sight. Everything else about the banquet seemed normal. The only unusual thing was that even the servants were allowed to partake in the wine, but that wasn’t odd enough really. It was a celebration after all, right?

And then he felt her beside him. A heavy haunting presence nearly had his lungs caving in from the pressure, but Seokjin somehow found the strength to breathe. He looked over and saw her sitting beside him, legs crossed perfectly, hands folded daintily in her lap. She was wearing the same uniform she had died in, the white of her collar stained from where her neck had been cut from her body, though her head was still attached now, turning to look at him. Her left eye was cut open, blood running down her cheek in the mockery of a tear, looking almost like the fine cracking of marble. She smiled at him, lips stretched thin and red.

“Why would he be celebrating if it were true?” Jiyeon asked.

And he knew.

Because this wasn’t a celebration.

It was a wake.

“He would be king of ash and rubble.”

He saw it now. An approaching rebel army, ready to take away everything that belonged to the king. There would be no stopping them. They had the hearts of the people, and their numbers grew day by day, a force too great for the wavering palace guards or even the king’s military. An easy conquest awaited the Bangtan Four, and they’d go down in history as the commoners who ended the Kim dynasty, with his father as the king weak enough to have lost it. But if the king laid waste to it all, burned everything to the ground before they could get there, then it would forever be his. They could not say they had bested the last Kim king; he would die on his own terms, with not one traitor in his ranks. His allies could not turn on him if they were dead as well.

“Poison,” Seokjin realized, his voice barely even a whisper.

“Hm?” General Mun asked, gulping down the last of his cup and wiping at his mouth. “What’d you say?”

“Poison!” Seokjin said, louder this time, voice shaking and uncontrolled. He stood and threw his own cup to the ground, shattering it. “Stop, all of you! It’s poisoned!”

He gazed out at all of them, their own cups rolling to the ground, as they became horrified or panicked, perhaps disbelieving, with every single one of their mouths already stained red from the wine.

Too late, Seokjin felt faint. His stomach clenched harshly, and a wave of something potent washed over him, a thousand sudden smells blending together at once. He stumbled away from the table, collapsing onto the marble steps to his father’s throne. *I was too stupid and too late.*

Several shrieked, while others screamed questions at him. The banquet dissolved into a noise of chaos, everyone blurring together in Seokjin's mind. Distress. Alarm. Panic. He wanted to hide, to shield himself from the danger around him. The urge to whimper or scream was so great, but Seokjin refused. He was a prince. He had to hold himself together in the face of everyone else's fear.

"What do you mean?"

"Poison? Oh, Heavens!"

"An antidote, is there an antidote?"

"Is this some kind of joke?"

And then he heard it. Dark and rumbling, the ground itself was shaking, roaring up and ready to consume everything in its path. It was a lone, crazed laugh, performed by the only person who could find any humor in this situation, as one who had helped orchestrate all this madness.

"A joke? I suppose it must be," the king announced. The entire court went silent at his words. "This is coming from my weak, feeble-minded son. An omega. Do you believe the words of a distressed omega, or your own king?"

Seokjin felt like he was going to die, right then and there, as his chest caved in on itself and the air left his lungs. His father had tried to poison him, and Seokjin had thought it couldn't get worse than that, a father killing his own son. He was wrong. This was the worst betrayal for Seokjin to endure.

He saw the confusion on the faces of the court, then felt the exact moment when they realized the king was referring to *him*, Prince Seokjin. A few sniffed the air and caught sight of him, trembling before the throne, and nodded, as it made sense, as if years of deceit could really be washed away by the few words of a mad man.

Seokjin saw it in the relaxing of the other nobles' frames, the easy way some of them began to grin. They would side against an omega in a heartbeat, even when put up against a madman.

Only Adviser Paek stood out to Seokjin in the sea of faces, his skin pale and face gaunt. The prince could tell that out of all of them, Adviser Paek believed Seokjin. It must be because Paek had painstakingly helped the king hide Seokjin's dynamic for years, and he must have understood what it meant for the king to so casually reveal that his only heir couldn't inherit. The king had given up on any possibility of a future.

The nobles didn't question or protest it. Just believed the king and shrugged their shoulders like it was a long time coming. Seokjin knew, in that moment, that they would not believe him about the poison.

And then General Mun began to vomit blood, with Lord Hae collapsing soon after, and the panic resumed as if the king hadn't said a word. Some of the nobles tried to run, but the king had planned for mishaps. The doors didn't move no matter who pushed at them. Seokjin knew they had to have been bolted shut or barricaded by servants on the outside as soon as the banquet began.

His father let out a great roar of frustration once he saw the chaos erupting once more, and his dark eyes locked with Seokjin's own. "You fucking brat," he growled. "I'll kill you."

Seokjin scrambled back, knowing the king meant it. His back hit the banquet table, and he found

there was nowhere for him to run as the king approached. There was only one option left for him. He had to fight.

Back in his father's prime, Seokjin would have gone down easily. Now, though, the king was weak from sitting in a throne for hours on end. He'd weathered the aging of his creaking joints and brittle bones, as well as the madness that had eaten at his mind. This gave Seokjin a chance.

Seokjin was not much of a fighter, but he still put up one hell of a fight. He was too quick for his father, ducking just out of arm's reach in the nick of time. Several plates shattered in the tussle as they were thrown and fell on. Seokjin felt shards dig into the sensitive skin of his back as his father finally caught him, holding him down by his throat, but the prince ignored the pain in favor of cracking a teapot over his father's head. The madman didn't so much as wince, laughing as the scalding hot tea burned his face an angry red.

"There was nothing worth protecting by normal means," the king rambled. "The Kim line was doomed. What else could I, the Phoenix, do to save it? It has to be killed, so that it can be reborn as something worthwhile."

"Phoenix? You're more like a hummingbird," Seokjin choked, still managing to sneer even as he felt his vision blur and his lungs sting.

The king's face twisted into something particularly nasty, and one of his hands left Seokjin's throat to reach around for something else on the banquet table. "Of course you don't understand. You, who shouldn't have been born. Gods, if I'd only known, I would've kicked your mother's belly once she told me she was pregnant."

"Fuck you, too," Seokjin spat out.

His father's thick, grubby fingers grabbed his jaw and began to pry his mouth open. "You'll drink it," his father promised. "Even if I must pour it down your throat, you will obey me in this. I won't have you ruin my plans again."

Seokjin panicked, trying to throw his head this way and that. He couldn't budge against his father's hold. Seokjin then tried to bite his father's fingers, but that didn't work either. The panic grew even greater once his father made a sound of triumph, bringing a cup forward. Seokjin didn't need to look; he knew what his father meant for him to drink.

He could feel the wine burn his throat as he choked on it, spitting and sputtering. Once he had swallowed enough to satisfy the king, the fingers holding his mouth open retracted, and the hand wrapped around his throat eased. Seokjin was let go and he rolled over unceremoniously, wine spilling from his lips.

"My last order," the king growled, swaying on his feet as he stood and addressed his guards, "is for you to kill every last servant and noble who refuses my cup, every guard who refuses this order, and any one who runs. Do this or face disgrace."

Some guards looked hesitant, while others were quick to do his bidding. The king spoke up once more to sway those who wavered, laughing as he did so. "No matter how hard they try to live, they'll die anyways. The Bangtan forces march on the capital as we speak. No one in this palace will survive their purge. So go on and give them a clean death if you so wish, like the *noble* soldiers you are."

The king dropped the cup of wine beside him, the red liquid splattering Seokjin's clothes as the cup shattered. The prince heaved, barely able to catch his breath, and coughed. The wine had been

rancid and dry, so sharp that Seokjin felt it in his gut now, boiling and eating away at his insides.

“Shit,” he cursed, mind a mess with no filter to stop him. “It’s sick. I’m sick...all of this...fucking sick.”

He heaved again, stronger than the last. This time there was something rising up behind it, the wine he’d choked down seeming to come back up in protest.

“You...you little whore,” he barely registered his father slurring. The king swayed, lips red not only from the wine now, but the blood that bubbled passed his lips. “Don’t you *dare* throw it up. Swallow it or I’ll fucking kill you.”

Seokjin was too sick to care. He couldn’t stop his body even if he wanted to, the pain in his gut too strong, churning angry like hot lava. *This is something else*, Seokjin thought hazily. *Something worse than poison, than getting sick.*

He had no more time to dwell on it, for not a minute later he vomited, the force of it seemingly so strong that his vision blacked.

Chapter End Notes

{ There will only be four people left alive who know what Crown Prince Seokjin looked like... }

please leave kudos or comments if you enjoyed!! they are v appreciated <3

next chapter is Yoongi's POV and will probably be MUCH shorter than this one!! but you'll get to meet the bangtan four briefly sooo :))

as i'm back in school and busy with applying for scholarships and all that jazz, i'm not sure when the next chapter will be...i would like to get it out by the end of january but i won't make any promises

TEN POINTS TO WHOEVER CAN GUESS WHICH FICTIONAL CHARACTER SEOKJIN'S FATHER IS BASED OFF OF :')

[LINK TO MY MIXTAPE ON 8TRACKS FOR THIS YE BOI](#)

find me on [tumblr](#) and [twitter](#) Feel free to message me if you have questions or just want to chat! <3

Aftermath of an Uprising

Chapter Summary

Yoongi tries to be strong in the face of the chaos he's wrought. Instead he falters.

Chapter Notes

TW: graphic depiction of mutilated corpses near the end of the chapter

at "The prince" there is a link for a youtube video of the song i used when writing the very last scene. if you want to really feel that amBIANCE, then pls use it :))

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

When Yoongi was first brought to his father's household, he was an unpleasant thing. The Min heir was known for kicking any servant who approached him and spitting in his own father's face. This behavior was excused only for a week on the basis that Yoongi had been raised in the wilderness; his father took him in knowing that he was sure to be a wild thing. But after attending a week's worth of lessons on etiquette and propriety, fighting was no longer allowed. At least not with his fists. Yoongi was taught that it was his words he should fight with. If he wanted to lash out at someone, he would do so with his tongue or he would not lash out at all.

Surprisingly enough, Yoongi found that he enjoyed this rule. He liked to twist his words to get out of lessons, and then when he was caught, he liked to spit out sentences so quick that his tutors couldn't get a word in edgewise. He had used this talent ever since, crafting lies around his own heart to get where he was now.

When the servants brought him the king's wine, Yoongi took a drink without hesitation. "The wine will not be wasted," he promised, licking his lips.

The servants must've been commanded only to stay until he partook of the wine, for they left not a moment after. Several minutes passed before Yoongi rose from his seat and made his way across his room. There was a plant resting in the corner, near the window where sunlight spilled forth. It was large and green, its bold leaves having spread out to touch both walls it sat between. The king had given him the plant as a birthday gift last year. Yoongi's stomach rolled just thinking of it. Another one of his *favours*. Without a second thought, he emptied his cup over the plant.

He did say the wine would not be wasted.

"Good riddance," he spat. With any luck, the poison would work on the plant as well as it would surely work on the king. It was not a minute later that Yoongi leaned over the plant and emptied the contents of his stomach, the antidote in his system purging him of the poison. Once he'd recovered enough, he drank some tea to wash away the awful taste.

Though Yoongi had provided the castor beans that produced the poison, he himself didn't know the exact mechanics of it all. He only knew of how quick it killed and the antidote that must be

taken to stop it. Despite what the king thought, Yoongi knew no magic tricks or spells to ensure its potency. He was just a man.

The king's delusions were no one's fault but Yoongi's; the omega used them to manipulate the king as his mind grew sick, deteriorating more and more with each passing day. Yoongi had called upon the king and referred to himself as a kindred spirit, a celestial being trapped in a human shell. There were perks to being a witch's son; Yoongi showed his proof with the parlor tricks and subtle illusions he'd learned from his mother when he was just a child. They paid off and the king began to trust him, to think of him as a confidant in spiritual matters. The king would sup with Yoongi once a week, mostly ranting and raving over nonsensical things, but sometimes he offhandedly mentioned points of interest to Yoongi and his cause.

When he did so, Yoongi was quick to write to Hoseok the following day of what he'd learned. Every scrap of information he learned was vital to the resistance they had poured so much of their blood, sweat and tears into. Even now, Yoongi was surprised at how wonderfully his plans had all gone.

He'd infiltrated the king's own court as one of the Bangtan Four and provided the means with which to destroy it. Yoongi tried not to dwell on the chaos that was undoubtedly going on in the dining hall right now. The suffering that the nobles were undergoing was deserved, he told himself. They had all sat by for years, watching as their king ran the country into the ground and slaughtered tens of thousands of innocents in his wake. Now it would be Yoongi's turn to sit by as their loyalty to a madman cost them their lives.

Except he would not watch. Not unless he had to.

When Yoongi had first mentioned the poison to Hoseok, the alpha had seemed hesitant in his reply. Hoseok didn't think it would be a good thing for the next king's reign to be built on top of so much carnage. Yoongi had wanted to scoff as soon as he read that. This was coming from the man who led the Bangtan forces into battle, killing whatever man or woman stood in the way of their kingdom's freedom.

Though Yoongi wanted nothing more than to scribble back a hasty reply, fuming over his fiancé's hypocrisy, instead he reminded Hoseok that any massacre at the palace would be acknowledged as the work of the last Kim king. *Besides, he wrote, we have to destroy any and all opposition to our rule. It'll be better for us to have an entirely new court set up instead of sifting through the old one.*

He also thought, but did not say, that it would be better if all the other nobles were dead, because then there would be no one to clamor for Prince Seokjin to inherit, no one to back his right to the throne over the Bangtan's own candidate.

The thought of Seokjin now was sobering. It was for the prince that Yoongi's stomach rolled uncomfortably. The omega had done all he could to keep Seokjin alive throughout this mess, so he didn't know why this guilt stuck with him. Seokjin had been taking the antidote every morning for a week instead of his usual suppressants. At most, the introduction of poison into his system would cause him to vomit for a few days. Nothing more, nothing less. The prince's survival was guaranteed, so Yoongi didn't understand why he had such an awful feeling.

Yoongi should not waver even once during this uprising, and yet he could not rid himself of the memory of Seokjin nor the debt he owed him. He remembered it as if it were yesterday. His father's funeral, the woods, his uncle.

Yoongi saw the prince as a boy of fourteen again with cheeks and hands painted red, glowing as the moonlight shone down upon him. Seokjin's eyes were dark, and his expression was twisted into

something fierce and untamed. He looked like a nightmare come to life. His silk shirt was torn and hung off of his shoulder, which was littered with purpling welts and crimson streaks. The Kim clan's mark was emblazoned on his upper back. Yoongi remembered gasping at the sight of it; the phoenix had looked like it was flailing and screeching.

His gasp had drawn Seokjin's attention, who whirled around, piercing eyes finding Yoongi's teary ones easily. At the sight of Yoongi, trembling and bleeding in the darkness, the nightmare disappeared, and something warm and soft took its place.

"It's alright," Seokjin had crooned gently. It was a sound only an omega could make. "Your uncle can't hurt you anymore."

The prince crouched down, holding his arms open, and before Yoongi knew it, he was wrapped up in Seokjin's embrace, being soothed and coddled like a frightened child. The prince patted Yoongi's head, coating his white hair in blood-the blood of the men he'd just killed. It was the first time Yoongi had felt safe since his father died.

Yoongi shook his head, returning to the present as another high-pitched scream rang in his ears.

Seokjin had saved him that night from a fate worse than death that night; it made sense for Yoongi to return the favor.

This was what he told himself as he listened to the cries of the palace, as he saw the shadows outside his room-servants slain left and right, guards killing themselves once their work was done. All of it was necessary. All of it was a part of the plan. No one from the king's regime could live but Seokjin.

Even the servants were a necessary sacrifice, though their deaths were harder for Yoongi to swallow. He wasn't so cold as to feel nothing, but saving them couldn't be risked. Some of them would be loyal to the Kim dynasty till the very end. Even when a new Kim king sat on the throne, they might refuse to swear allegiance. Servants were fickle, unpredictable things. Yoongi didn't have time to waste on them.

Yoongi had sent one servant in particular to her death just this morning. From the moment Yoongi had ordered Jisoo to transport the castor beans, her life was forfeit. Nobody could know that Yoongi had provided the poison for the massacre taking place, or else the Bangtan Four's aspirations would be dirtied with blood, just as Hoseok had feared.

Jisoo was a loose end, one Yoongi would have had to get rid of eventually. Her clumsiness in the task she'd been given only sped things along. If she hadn't been caught by Seokjin of all people, then Yoongi wouldn't have sent her to prepare Seokjin's tea these last few mornings. Jisoo's reports mentioned Seokjin's immediate dislike for her. Yoongi had hoped that this, combined with the prince's emerging omega features due to his lack of suppressants, would make Seokjin suspicious enough to inspect his tea and condemn Jisoo for it.

Seokjin was not a forgiving man. With any luck, he'd dispose of Yoongi's problem for him.

He'd been right. Not too soon before the banquet was to start, before the current chaos began, Jisoo and her things had been delivered to Yoongi's quarters. He'd vouched for the girl's service and filed the paperwork for her entrance into the palace, therefore becoming responsible for her remains in the event that she was to be violently discharged.

The sight of her had his eyebrows raising, stomach clenching. It was an example of Kim Seokjin's duality at its finest. The prince who had regretted his beheading of a servant just a few days ago had ordered the similar execution of another without a second thought. Somehow Yoongi

understood it. Seokjin had a high opinion of the last girl; this one he did not.

Over the years, Yoongi had been thankful that Seokjin had taken such a liking to him. Well, as much as Seokjin could like someone, that is. The point was that Seokjin guarded the things he liked very well. He went out of his way to protect them in any way he could. But those that he felt were unnecessary, the ones he didn't know or hated? Seokjin would either not think of them at all or set out to utterly destroy them. Either way, they would be left hanging out to dry. There was no middle ground for Kim Seokjin, no normal moral conscience to be found within him. It was to be expected from one who grew up among the mad king's court.

Yoongi wondered where he would stand after all of this was said and done. Hated or unnecessary? Once Seokjin realized the full extent of Yoongi's hand in this rebellion, there'd be no question about it. The prince would positively loathe him. The thought made his chest hurt, but there was no escaping his fellow omega's hatred. Seokjin wouldn't be able to keep it up long, though, due to the new court the Bangtan Four would create. Despite all the Min heir had done to take away Seokjin's throne, he'd be the only person Seokjin could turn to in a court of rebel sympathizers. It was rather sad that Seokjin's only ally would be the man who had destroyed his future.

It was very crucial for Seokjin to rely on Yoongi alone. This was so the prince's influence wouldn't be sullied by allies outside of the Bangtan Four. There were plans laid out for Seokjin already, ones that relied on his willing cooperation.

Yoongi paused in his thoughts, noticing the sudden silence that gathered around him. The air was so still that Yoongi wondered if the slightest movement would cause it to shatter. Fortunately for him, as he shuffled over to his door, it didn't. He tried not to dwell on what it meant, but when Yoongi opened his door, he was hit with the reality of it, a sharp slap to the face.

He had barely stomached the sounds of the slaughter. The sight of it was a hundred times worse. He tried to block it even as he waded out into the mess of things. The halls were splattered in blood and bodies were strewn everywhere, so many in one place that Yoongi had to step on slick, cooling body parts just to make his way out of a corridor.

His knees were weak, and he almost collapsed as he came upon even more of them. Yoongi couldn't breathe through his nose. If he did, he'd vomit from the overwhelming smell of rot and iron.

Your fault, a voice whispered. *You did this*.

Yoongi pushed it away. Everything that he did, he did so the country would not burn. What was it that Seokjin had said yesterday morning? No one else would have let the servant girl's death be quick and painless. Yoongi felt the situation now was a lot like that. If it hadn't been for his interference, the king would've chosen fire as his champion. The entire capital could've burned. This massacre had been their best bet.

The omega's movements were a blur, as if he were a puppet on strings moving to the beat of someone else's drum. If anyone asked, he wouldn't be able to tell just how he navigated through the palace on his own. When Yoongi at last made it to the doors of the palace, a sigh of relief left him, and his eyes stung.

He didn't immediately throw open the doors. The Min heir glanced back one final time in the direction of the dining hall. There was an urge beneath his skin to check on Seokjin, nothing more than an instinctual need to nurture and protect a fellow omega. He pushed it down as soon as it rose up and left the palace of death behind him.

It's done, he told himself. His hands shook at the thought, fidgeting with the golden ring on his left. *Everything, all of it. It's done.*

He thought of Hoseok, who he hadn't seen in over a year, and his breathing quickened. *Hoseok, Hoseokie, Alpha*. It was a mantra to keep him sane and pieced together amidst this mess. Once he got to Hoseok, and Jeongguk, and Namjoon...it would be done for good.

There would be no more blood after this. The next era was to be an era of peace. It had to be. All of them had promised. Yoongi took a deep breath, opened the eyes he'd closed shut, and moved forward.

When he made it to the gates of the palace, he could hear them, smell them-the chorus of thousands of voices with thousands of eager, riled up smells. For a moment, he could almost pick up on Hoseok's scent, but a slight breeze ripped it from him before he could so much as taste it.

There was no pounding on the gates. No. They didn't need any of that with Yoongi here. The palace would be taken quietly and quickly with no one to protest the rebels' occupation. He huffed as he worked, anxiety curling in his gut. His muscles were frailer than they were when he arrived here. It was a miracle, but Yoongi managed to unlatch the doors that had closed shut on him so long ago, pushing open the door to his cage.

He nearly sobbed at the sight of the familiar faces, but composed himself. Yoongi wanted so badly to run launch himself in the direction of his future mate's scent, but the gleaming red and orange that caught his eye reminded him of his duty, the standard he must set.

He bowed, eyes low enough so that all he could make out was the sweeping phoenix marked on their leader's neck. "The Imperial Palace is yours, my king."

Kim Namjoon would have none of it. He laughed and reached out a hand to clap Yoongi on the shoulder. "There's no need for that yet, hyung."

The alpha was taller than Yoongi now, but still as tan and dimpled as he had been. The alpha looked so youthful, less morose than the Namjoon of Yoongi's memories, that Yoongi's felt his anxiety slowly begin to uncurl, turning to mere hesitance.

"There's someone else who's been waiting to see you," Namjoon said gently, tossing his head back in the direction of-

Hoseok. Beautiful, sweaty, smiling Hoseok who was looking at Yoongi so warmly like he had just hung the stars or something so very incredible when he only opened a door. Something else pooled in Yoongi's gut, something so very hot and thick that he hadn't felt in *years*.

He opened his mouth, ready to spout off some sarcastic or biting remark to hide how weak his knees were. It would've worked fine, too, if his own tongue had not betrayed him.

"A-alpha," he murmured, reaching out like a child as his face flushed eagerly. And Hoseok lunged for him, warm hands encircling him as he brought Yoongi close, flush against his own hard chest.

"Yoongi," Hoseok's voice was a growl, soft and dark. Yoongi felt the vibrations of it against his neck as Hoseok nuzzled him, lips just barely, barely grazing his skin.

"I did it, Hoseok. It...it's done. All of it. The palace is ours," Yoongi blabbered, suddenly not sure of what to say. There were so many thoughts going through his mind, so much happiness bursting forth from all the grief he felt, that he wasn't sure where to start.

“Shh,” Hoseok hushed. “Enough of all that. You’re here now. You’re free. That’s all that matters to me.”

He distantly heard Namjoon yelling, with some people cheering. Yoongi ignored it, for it was as Hoseok said. None of that mattered.

Yoongi brought his left hand up off of Hoseok’s shoulder, holding it up to the sunlight that bore down on them. The ring on that hand glinted in the sunlight, and the rays seemed to wash everything away. All the pain, the longing, the carnage. Their promise shone in place of that, the one they had made when they were children, young and stupid and so in love. It glowed so very bright for all to see.

Soon, Yoongi heard the ring whisper. Sooner than you think.

Hoseok, as acting general, perhaps should have helped with the clean up, but Yoongi kept his alpha close to his side, needing the comfort he had been deprived of for so long. Yoongi had enough of keeping up appearances in the old court; this new one would be different. He cared not a bit if their troops saw him cuddling with General Jung in the gardens.

It was a good thing that Hoseok didn’t care either. His alpha had a brief conversation with Namjoon, both their faces dark and solemn, before Yoongi took Hoseok to the palace gardens to catch up. The gardens were alive and stainless, somehow managing to escape unscathed from the poisonous chaos of the palace. The sight of it, the colors and the life around him, made Yoongi feel at peace.

Hoseok told him of Gangwon’s easy fall, of how the king’s capital had opened on its own for their forces, and of how he had missed him.

“You’re so thin now,” Hoseok chided. “Have you not been eating well?”

Yoongi shifted in his alpha’s arms. “I’ve eaten enough,” he lied. The Min heir had been too stressed, too nervous to eat well these last few weeks.

Hoseok smiled teasingly, knowingly, and poked one of his cheeks. “Wait till you see Jeonggukie! He’s much bigger than you now. You’ll have to eat a lot if you want to catch up to him.”

“Where *is* that brat?” Yoongi asked suddenly, realizing that he hadn’t smelled or seen Jeongguk even once.

Hoseok pulled away, and Yoongi would’ve sought after the warmth lost if it weren’t for the alpha’s arms which held him at a distance. He looked like a child about to be scolded.

“Don’t be mad,” Hoseok started.

Suddenly Yoongi was mad.

“You sent him off on a solo mission, didn’t you,” Yoongi’s voice was cold and his words weren’t even a question, just a statement of a fact.

Namjoon and Hoseok had discussed sending Jeongguk and his father’s forces out to gather any nobles who may sympathize with the Bangtan cause, but Yoongi had put his foot down. Jeongguk wasn’t on suppressants, and he was only eighteen. It wasn’t that Yoongi didn’t trust Jeongguk to be responsible. It was that he didn’t trust the soldiers around him or nobles he met to show restraint. This was months ago, and Yoongi had wrote a very nice, very loving letter in response to Hoseok

about how if Jeongguk was so much as left alone with a band of rowdy soldiers, Yoongi would make it his personal mission to deprive Hoseok of something *very dear*.

Hoseok began to sweat. “Hyung, listen. Jeongguk can hold his own. He’s a big boy now, and he doesn’t like us treating him like a kid,” he reasoned.

“I’m listening,” Yoongi said, face unreadable.

Hoseok took Yoongi’s hand in his own hesitantly, and when the omega didn’t jerk away, he continued. “It’s just a small mission. Not even a mission really. We sent him with part of his father’s guard, so we knew they could be trusted. He’s just going to pop in at Prince Taehyung’s place and make sure he isn’t dead or anything.”

Yoongi’s eyes nearly bugged out of his head. “You sent Jeongguk to capture Prince Taehyung?”

When Yoongi had last saw him three years ago, Jeongguk was a soft, willowy thing with brown doe eyes and silky hair. Yoongi hoped to the Heavens that he had grown immensely as Hoseok said, and maybe even turned a little ugly while he was at it. Because Taehyung? Taehyung was a spoiled, moody prince with a penchant for pretty things like Jeongguk. Before he’d been thrown out of the palace, Taehyung had spent most of his time in gisaeng houses.

Jeongguk wouldn’t take kindly to any advances, and Prince Seokjin wouldn’t take kindly to any bruises on his brother’s face. Things would already be rocky enough the way they were.

“His father insisted,” Hoseok shifted uncomfortably, shrugging his shoulder. “And Jeongguk wanted to go. He wanted to...see if he could take on the prince.”

Yoongi’s eyes narrowed into slits. “Oh?” he said. “And just why did Lord Jeon insist on such a disadvantageous arrangement?”

“I don’t know,” Hoseok admitted, sounding hollow. “Lord Jeon has been rather ambitious as of late. He was pressing for Namjoon to take Jeongguk as his mate, but-”

Yoongi’s chest rumbled with something particularly unpleasant. “What?” he exploded. “When did this happen?”

Hoseok frowned, looking put on the spot. “Namjoon didn’t want me to tell you. You already don’t like Lord Jeon the way it is. It was...a few months ago, I think? But Yoongi, love, you can’t get angry. We have to keep Lord Jeon on our side.”

Yoongi’s hands were shaking with rage. Wedding Jeongguk to Namjoon not only went against their original plan, it also undermined Jeongguk’s authority. He was one of the Bangtan Four, so why did his father offer him up like a trophy of sorts to Namjoon, a prize for the alpha who would take the throne next?

“If it weren’t for his influence,” Yoongi hissed, “I’d-”

[“The prince,”](#) a new voice interrupted impatiently. “Where are we to find him?”

Yoongi turned around, deflating at the sight of Namjoon. Whatever joy had been on the alpha’s face when Yoongi first saw him was gone now, replaced by a certain annoyance and heavy, brooding guilt. Namjoon had helped to move the bodies, so his arms were stained with blood and grime. He carried a disgusting smell, the smell of poison and rot. Namjoon’s hands, which he always covered with long, leather wrist guards, were clenched at his side.

He reminded Yoongi of what the omega had been trying to forget, and as a result, Yoongi felt annoyed. Couldn't he have one moment of peace, one second to recover?

"The dining hall," Yoongi snapped, not liking Namjoon's tone or the way he looked at him, as if Yoongi was some sort of monster. "Where else? That's where all the nobles were gathered. He's probably passed out by now, that or puking in the corner."

"Funny," Namjoon said. He wasn't laughing. "Because he's not. We already looked there."

"Then his rooms? What about that? Or the kitchens? Have you checked those?" Yoongi thought quickly, trying not to sound panicked, but his voice was unsure.

Namjoon gave a curt nod.

"Check the dining hall again then! You must have missed something! Maybe he's under the tables or hiding amongst the dead!"

"The dining hall," Namjoon said, looking like he was about to be sick. He wet his lips and started again. "The dining hall is...a mess, and it was hard enough to look the ways things were, with the smell and everything. Some of our soldiers had to be...well, taken out by force."

Yoongi froze. "What do you mean?" he asked softly. "Why did you have to take people out by force?"

Hoseok's hold tightened on him, and Yoongi could tell that his alpha wanted to so badly to cover his ears, to shield him from whatever it was Namjoon was about to say.

Namjoon swallowed, and he wouldn't look Yoongi in the eyes. "It smelled like heat. An omega's heat. We think that the poison...triggered one of the noble's heat...right before they died."

No, no, no, no, no.

It couldn't be Seokjin, right? If Seokjin had gone into heat, they would've found him already. They would've been able to smell him, but they hadn't. But...but...the only one of the Bangtan Four who knew Seokjin was an omega was Yoongi. He hadn't told the others because he'd betrayed Seokjin enough already. Seokjin had protected Yoongi all those years ago, an act of kindness from one omega to another, and so Yoongi wanted to let Seokjin come out as an omega on his own.

He hadn't been giving Seokjin suppressants for a week, so yes, some omega features were going to be more prominent after this, but in no way should a heat have started. When Yoongi's mother had given him the beans, when she'd explained the suppressants and antidote switched for them, she had acted as if they would have time. Time to get Seokjin back on suppressants, time to hide his secret once more. She had never mentioned a heat.

But if it was Seokjin...if he had went into heat...They all thought Seokjin was a beta. They were looking for a beta. If they found a fresh omega corpse draped in finery, they wouldn't even think it was the prince.

"Let me go," Yoongi said suddenly, hands gripping Hoseok's arms to steady himself. "Let me see. I have to *know*."

Namjoon and Hoseok exchanged a look then, something silent passing between them. Yoongi could tell that Namjoon thought better of it, and perhaps Hoseok did too, but they weren't the type of alphas to coddle and shield an omega when that treatment went against said omega's wishes. Slowly, Hoseok loosened his hold on Yoongi, his arms falling to his side.

“Okay, Yoongi,” he murmured. “I can’t stop you. You know that. But just, let me come with, alright?”

As if Yoongi would have been able to handle it alone a second time.

Hoseok led him through the blood-soaked halls by the hand, as Yoongi shut his eyes to the aftermath of the slaughter, having seen enough of it earlier. When they came to the dining hall, doors flung open, Yoongi could already smell it in the air, sharp and sweet.

Seokjin.

Seokjin hadn’t had a definite smell when he’d been masquerading as a beta, but once he’d unknowingly gone off of his suppressants, he’d begun to emit a faint fragrance. The heat scent here was much like it, and so there was no longer any doubt in Yoongi’s mind.

He opened his eyes only because he had to, and the sight of the dining hall was like a punch to the gut. The corridors were nothing compared to this madness. Whereas the servants there had been stabbed one or twice, or simply poisoned, some of the nobles here had been torn to shreds. Yoongi followed the smell of heat as if in a daze, wading through the blood and guts of the people he had known.

Lady Paek was the most peaceful. Her eyes were closed as if she were sleeping, her wrinkled lips crusted with blood. The others, though, were a different story.

Lord Hae’s throat was swollen shut, eyes blown open and skin purple. He looked like he had been clawing at his neck before he died. Lady Nam and her husband were much the same. The poison had not allowed them to pass swiftly.

You’re a monster, their corpses whispered as he passed. Yoongi clenched Hoseok’s hand tighter, his own sweaty and clammy. Hoseok whispered a few words in his ears, probably urging him to reconsider all of this, to back out and leave already. Yoongi could not.

No, he told himself. *I’m not a monster. Things went wrong. This part was supposed to be...bloodless.*

The worst of the corpses were at the very end, closest to the throne. The right side of Lord Mun’s face was caved in, as if a great force had slammed into it. His beautiful face was at an odd angle; Yoongi realized a second later that his neck had been snapped. General Mun rested beside him, thick neck nearly cleaved in two, his belly wet with red. He’d fallen with one bloody hand reaching for his mate.

Adviser Paek was near the wall, a ceremonial-looking sword embedded in his belly. The old man’s head hung, chin tucked into his chest. Yoongi was glad for that, as he didn’t have to see his surely twisted features.

The next body Yoongi wouldn’t have recognized, if it weren’t for the clothes, an expensive green hanbok soaked with blood. It was Lord Sam’s favorite outfit. Yoongi had to cover his mouth, vomit rising as he took in Lord Sam’s features-or more appropriately, the lack of them.

The eyes had been gouged out, empty holes of raw flesh. It seemed as though claws had shredded his face, turning it into a mess of torn tissue. Whatever it was that had clawed at Lord Sam’s face had gutted him as well, his organs spilling out into a pile beside him.

“What happened here?” Yoongi breathed. “I-It obviously wasn’t poison that killed them.”

Hoseok's face was tight as he cleared his throat, searching for words to say. "The omega's heat. Namjoon says it probably caused them to fight each other, to fight for the omega. That's why everything here is so...brutal."

"Did you find the dead omega then?" Yoongi asked, not even breathing or moving in that moment. He certainly hadn't seen Seokjin's body anywhere, but he wouldn't have if they'd already moved it.

The alpha shifted on his feet and slowly, ever so slowly, pointed to one of the bodies. Lady Nam.

Yoongi deflated. He had forgotten for a moment, that his sense of smell was so much greater than his friends, that he could pick out where the heat was coming from even amongst all of the other putrid smells gathered here. If it were not for Hoseok beside him, he would have fallen over in relief.

Seokjin wasn't dead, just missing, but that begged the question of where exactly he was. This was where the scent of heat was the thickest, and a fight to the death had ensued over it. Where was Seokjin, the omega they had fought over?

"C'mon, Yoongi," Hoseok urged, voice trembling. "Haven't you seen enough? Please, let's just leave already. Not even Namjoon could handle this, you know."

Yoongi sniffed one more time, ignoring Hoseok's words. There was a trace of something else in the air, some alpha scent he would smell on Seokjin for days at a time. He thought of all the corpses he should have seen and suddenly felt very stupid.

"Mun Kai is gone as well," Yoongi realized. "The general's son. Have you found him yet either?"

Hoseok frowned and shook his head. "I was told his father sent him to man the city gates," he offered. "But when we arrived and took the city, he was nowhere to be found."

Yoongi took in a deep, shaky breath. He hadn't been aware that General Mun was sending his son out-his son who'd made numerous public attempts at courting the prince in the past-or else he would've planned accordingly.

Even if I made plans for that, they would've surely gone wrong, Yoongi thought, feeling faint. Seokjin's heat ruined everything. So much for quiet deaths, for the prince's safety.

It was all a mess now. Seokjin was missing and in heat, and the most likely culprit to have taken him was Kai Mun, the alpha half in love with him. Seokjin had saved Yoongi from a fate worse than death, of being mated against his will; Yoongi had condemned him to it.

Yoongi felt sudden phantom laughter rolling down his spine, and his eyes shot up, meeting the blank stare of the crazed Kim king who sat upon the throne. His mouth was soaked in red so dark it looked black, and it curved up, up, upwards into a grin so wide it nearly split his face.

The two of us really are otherworldly beings, he imagined the king saying, as he had so long ago. Both monsters, cloaked in layers and layers of human skin.

For once, Yoongi dared not disagree.

me: next chapter will be MUCH shorter and done around the end of this month
me, two days later: okay so the chapter is done and 5.6k+ words long...

note to self, don't promise anything ever again because i am a filthy liar lmao

for anyone worried about seokjin, let me just say that the 'unreliable narrator' tag really comes into play here.

i hope that yoongi's POV and seokjin's POV are noticeably different from each other. whereas they do have similarities in their cold demeanors and willingness to use people in schemes, yoongi feels a more significant amount of guilt over the aftermath of his plots. seokjin only cares if it affects people he likes (priorities, my man)

TL;DR

yoongi=soft boy with frosty layer

seokjin=mostly solid ice, does have a heart, but it's the size of the grinch's

* ok so before ya'lls freak about any incest that's going to be happening in this here fic, let me just lay down the author law (RED TRUTH) and say that it is DISTANT RELATION...Namjoon is a Kim, but he's like a third cousin twice removed or whatever so don't worry...

A Prince, a Bastard, and a Brothel

Chapter Summary

Seokjin and Taehyung escape the palace, but a happy ending is nowhere in sight.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

There was the cramping, the awkward bone-shifting of presenting, and then there was this. The fire and the flames of his nightmare. Cold, grubby hands grabbing at him as his body shrieked in protest. Mind rendered mush.

He drifted in and out of consciousness. One second he was on the floor, the next he was standing, or kneeling. The ache in his body never changed, his core drenched in need for something he didn't really want.

Seokjin felt his face turn hot, one side laced with wet pain, and he wanted to cry. Something was wrong with his face, his beautiful face. He grabbed at it, blood mixing with tears, and found something sharp and solid there. The prince tugged it free with a yank, and wailing filled his head as the skin there cracked, peeling apart and falling from his face in response.

It was too much, the hands he felt all over him, cold and harsh as they tore at his clothes and skin alike, so he lashed out. He raked his nails, twisted his fingers, buried them both deep, deep, into warm, moist flesh.

The sounds satisfied him, the squelching and squishing of torn flesh and muscles that were stripped from crushed bone.

None of them are worthy, something in him crowed. Let them reap what they've sowed.

Seokjin heard yelling at one point, several points actually, but it was too much to decipher who exactly was screaming, especially amidst the background of the crackling fire that roared in his ears. The flames which surrounded him fed the hearth in his belly, amassing into a harrowing, familiar sight.

"Friendly cup, bitter tea...have you been paying attention, phoenix son?" his dream demon rumbled, digging its claws into his churning belly.

The prince didn't fear the demon as he should in that moment. Instead, a more powerful emotion took over him: rage. If it weren't for the dryness of his mouth and soreness of his throat, he would've spit out curse after curse, promising a thousand painful deaths.

The demon smiled as if it could read his mind, feel those thoughts bounce around inside its own skull. "Be angry all you want, fight it if you can. You're just an omega-a pathetic, delicate doll. What can you do against your own nature, these desires that kindle inside of you?"

The demon stretched its claws, scraping them across the outside of his pulsing womb. Seokjin stilled. The creature took this as permission to lean closer as it answered its own question, breath rank as it drooled molten steel over his scent gland. "All you can do now," the demon purred, "is

burn ”

The prince's throat suddenly felt very hoarse, and his face became damp with something besides blood. He knew then, that he was the one screaming now, his voice having joined so many of the others around him. The demon disappeared, fading away as if chased off by the prince's hellish cries.

A fever dream. That's what all of this is, he convinced himself. But when did I go to sleep?

He thought of the demon's sickening words, the advice to just roll over and accept fate, letting the waves of heat wash all trace of self-awareness away. He thought of the debt he owed Yoongi, the wetness along his own thighs that he wished was nothing more than blood.

I am more than this, the prince realized. How can I burn when I am fire made flesh, the blood of the great and mighty phoenix?

It was when he found his resolve, heat fading like it was nothing more than a bad dream, that he identified the scent of an angry alpha within the hall. Seokjin took a few deep breaths to steady himself despite his rising anxiety, and something inside of him recoiled. The alpha he caught wind of usually had a pleasant smell, like that of roses and spice, but now it was overshadowed by a sour smell.

Brother, the recoiling part of Seokjin whispered. Our sire's son. He'll keep us safe until this passes.

Seokjin opened his eyes and really wished that he hadn't.

The prince woke from his heat dream to a world of death. Amidst the still corpses that surrounded him, the muted grays brought by the heat, he found a cold anchor to latch onto. His brother's hands were a relief against his burning skin, grabbing Seokjin's face and looking him over frantically.

Seokjin had never seen his brother look so scared.

“Seokjin,” Taehyung's voice wavered. “Seokjin, your face...”

“What?” Seokjin's response was a drawn out slur, tongue heavy against his cheek.

Taehyung shook his head, the movement almost too fast for Seokjin to handle. The omega felt his head pound, eyes dizzy as he tried to keep up with Taehyung. The alpha knelt to inspect his hands next and wiped them free of blood with his own shirt. He then grabbed a fistful of Seokjin's clothing and ripped it down, exposing the flushed skin of his neck to the cool air.

Seokjin squinted, only a little ruffled at the scandalous baring of his skin, and somehow found his voice. “W-what are you... *doing*, Tae?”

Taehyung's eyes searched his neck and collarbones, but he seemed to be satisfied with whatever he saw there, for not a moment later he let go and covered Seokjin with his cloak. The material was suffocating, yet Seokjin let out a pleased whine. He liked the feeling of being wrapped up, as if someone was embracing him.

“Hyung, you've gotta listen to me, okay? This is very important. I know you're not of sound mind right now, but I want you to think very carefully about what I'm going to ask, okay?”

Seokjin bobbed his head, though he kept his gaze off to the side, where Adviser Paek was still writhing around the sword in his belly. That was the Mun family sword. Seokjin wondered how it

had gotten there, when all the Muns here were dead.

“Is there anywhere we can hide in this palace? A place nobody knows about?”

Adviser Paek’s eyes bulged out, so large that Seokjin swore he could see each and every tiny vein in them, even from this distance. His mouth opened and closed, phantom screams dying off before they could even begin.

“Gods, Seokjin! Think! There’s a rebel army out there-”

Remember, he swore Paek’s mouth moved to say.

“I remember,” Seokjin said softly.

He told Taehyung of Adviser Paek’s passage, of the secret route to the older man’s private residence. Seokjin grabbed his brother’s arm to steady himself as he stood on wobbly legs, wincing at the ache in his lower half.

“We can’t just hide, Taehyung,” Seokjin murmured, shaking his head. “They’d hunt us down eventually, especially with me smelling the way I do. We have to run if we want to stand a chance.”

Taehyung frowned but he gave a quick jerk of his head in agreement. He still trusted Seokjin’s judgement, even when he had every reason to consider it impaired. Seokjin felt his heart clench in his chest, painful and fierce.

His clouding vision caught him off guard, and he squinted, blinking several times. It was as if there were flames on the edges of his mind, just waiting to pull him back under the throes of heat. Seokjin gritted his teeth and forced himself to stay conscious. He wouldn’t, couldn’t let the heat wash over him once more. The omega didn’t know if he’d be strong to fight it a second time.

Taehyung wrapped a helpful arm around him, and they moved quickly, leaving the banquet of corpses behind them without another glance. There was no time, and even if there had been, Seokjin didn’t think he wanted to see what had happened to his father’s court.

You don’t need to see it, something in him jeered. *Not when you lived it.*

Seokjin ignored that part of himself, the memories that he could pull out with a simple touch. He had to focus on getting out of this palace alive, then he could think about things like that. Taehyung guided him out through the way he had snuck in, a servant’s passage behind their father’s throne that hadn’t been used in years.

“No one saw me come this way,” he assured Seokjin. “No one will see us go.”

So much for no one seeing them.

The corridors outside the passage entrance were chaos, a swarm of servants and guards pitted against each other, though the fighting was rather one-sided. The trained guards were outfitted with weapons of all sorts, while the servants’ greatest weapons were little more than kitchen knives

Seokjin murmured in his brother’s ear, sluggish and weary as he rattled off the directions to Adviser Paek’s chambers. Taehyung had never visited Paek’s wing of the palace, never had a need to seek out other allies when he was the king’s favorite.

As Taehyung guided him according to the directions he was given, Seokjin could see it in some of

the faces they passed, looks of shock and eagerness when one happened to catch his scent. One servant was foolish enough to lunge for the omega, but Taehyung jerked a dagger across her neck and ended the brawl before it could begin. Others caught off guard were quickly cut down by those they sought to escape from or end. Most didn't notice, however, preoccupied in their own struggle for survival.

Taehyung pulled his cloak around Seokjin tighter, as if trying to keep the omega's scent entrapped by his own. "We have to hurry," he hissed, eyes manic. "Before anyone smart catches on."

Seokjin shivered at the look in his brother's eyes, murmuring his assent. "Not much further now," he huffed, though the words were more of an assurance for himself than Taehyung.

His brother disposed of yet another wayward servant before they disappeared inside Paek's rooms. Taehyung's face twisted into wrath guilt as he disemboweled the man, and Seokjin found his head pounding, his stained fingers and cheek twitching in response, as if his body remembered something that his mind did not.

Adviser Paek's residence was just as Seokjin remembered it. Or it would have been, if it were not for the slew of cold cadavers that greeted them.

There were no signs of a struggle throughout the house, all items pristine and put away neatly, so it wasn't the result of any Bangtan rebels or even petty thieves. The bodies were all peacefully placed, as if they had just fallen asleep instead of passed on, and the still air reeked of a bitter, familiar taste.

"Poison," Seokjin breathed. "He even went so far as to poison those here."

This was Adviser Paek's private residence, the family home given to him by the king. Paek lived at the palace instead for his work, and over the years, the residence had been turned into a guest house of sorts for when Paek's mistresses or illegitimate children would visit, though Seokjin had never seen any of them firsthand.

If the king would go so far as to eliminate even the bastards of his most trusted ally, then Seokjin wondered how much further he would reach. Assassins and gifts of wine could be issued with a snap of his fingers. How many of the nobles not at court had he seen fit to target?

Seokjin had to sit for a few minutes just to stop his knees from shaking. "Look for anything of value, any money or jewelry we might need," he told Taehyung, voice wavering. "I imagine we'll be on the run for a while."

All of our potential allies are dead. The rebels have taken the city like you said, and with it, the people, he thought, but did not say. *We run and then we'll hide. They find us and we die.*

Once Seokjin's jitters had stilled, he helped Taehyung. They threw documents off of desks, searching for papers of anything worthwhile, and inspected the jewelry boxes of Paek's whores. Most of the jewels were fake, all clever forgeries to fool the ill bred lovers that Paek hid away here. A sudden rush of energy filled Seokjin as he recognized this. He used this indignant fury to crush several hollow beads underfoot. The energy left him as quickly as it came, though, and Seokjin soon found himself leaning against the wall, disgusted with his weak self.

Taehyung gave him a worried look. "Seokjin," he started to say, then thought better of it.

The omega merely looked at him, too weak to vocally respond. He was trying to ignore the churning in his gut so he could focus on their next step; he realized he was failing.

Taehyung frowned, deep lines looking so very wrong on his face. “We need to get you to a doctor. *This*,” he gestured to Seokjin’s body, which shook like a leaf, “isn’t normal.”

“No doctor,” Seokjin slurred. “No one we can trust. Gotta...run.”

His brother was silent. When he spoke next, his words were soft, as if he were speaking to a child or perhaps one of those stray, injured animals he was fond of adopting. “You won’t make it far unless we get a doctor or somebody to look you over. I know you’re suppressing it right now, hyung. I get that. But if you keep it buried for too long, you’re going to fry your insides.”

Seokjin wilted. He didn’t like the sounds of that. He wanted to keep his insides. Those were important, just like his face.

“Where? Where would we...go?” he asked, struggling to find the words as the inferno slept on behind his eyes.

“I know a place we can stay, friends who will hide us. They’ll send for a doctor or help you with your heat.”

Heat.

It was so much more real once someone else said it. Seokjin instinctively clenched his thighs together, abhorring the wetness between them. He wanted so much to protest, to warn Taehyung that the more people there were who knew of their whereabouts, the more dangerous it would be for them.

But they had no other choice. Seokjin felt himself give a slow nod and he rose to follow his brother out of the silent estate. Taehyung tucked a small chest under one of his arms, filled with what little valuable items they had found. Seokjin leaned against his other side so he would not stumble, and yet stumble he did, nearly tripping as his feet caught on something solid near the entryway.

He would’ve faceplanted if it weren’t for Taehyung’s steady arms. He merely fell to one knee instead, and the twinge of pain brought Seokjin back for a brief moment. He squinted, watery eyes roving over the still body he’d almost fallen over. He took in the salt-and-pepper hair, the wrinkled face and veiny hands, then finally the light blue servant’s uniform.

“Jae,” he blurted out without thinking. “Jae, why are you here?”

The dead omega didn’t answer. He just...sat there, eyes closed in sleep and hands folded across his chest as if in prayer. He held something in his hands, a small leather book that Seokjin at first mistook for one of those banned religious texts. The prince grabbed at it clumsily and found a beaded bracelet attached to the book. Upon opening to it, Seokjin realized that it wasn’t anything as forbidden as a religious keepsake. It couldn’t be. All of the inked words were in Jae’s handwriting. Seokjin couldn’t make any sense of it, but he tucked it in the folds of Taehyung’s cloak all the same. He’d learn how to read again later.

He thought of the anger that he had felt just that morning, of how furious he had been at Jae, so much so that he was willing to banish the other omega from the palace. That rage was gone now, replaced by the dull ache of regret. Jae’s disregard for Seokjin had hurt more than he would have ever admitted under normal circumstances, but now the man was dead. Seokjin could allow himself to feel something at his passing.

“Hyung,” his brother whispered, recognition dawning in his gaze.

Taehyung, though he hadn't really known the old omega, did know of his importance in Seokjin's household. His brother swallowed, face stricken, and for a moment Seokjin thought he would cry in his place.

Seokjin held out a trembling hand, and Taehyung pulled him up. "It's alright," Seokjin murmured, beginning to ramble. "It's all going to be fine."

He told himself that it was because they didn't have time for tears, that he had to be mentally strong in this moment, the support Taehyung needed, but Seokjin knew that wasn't really it.

He couldn't cry even if he wanted to. That part of him had been broken long ago.

Taehyung was used to being taken care of. Even when he'd grown up on his grandfather's farm, living off the land on a poor man's salary, he'd been spoiled. His mother and grandfather always thought of him first, giving up their own dinner portions to Taehyung when the harvest that year was bad. If Taehyung wanted something, fancy dolls or pretty clothes from the market that they couldn't afford, then his mother would always do her best to make alternative, cheaper versions of them at home. He had straw dolls and hand-embroidered shirts to fulfill his childish wants.

It was the same when he was brought to the palace, a wide-eyed eight year old who knew nothing of court life. His father was the kindest man in the world, offering him up the kind of expensive clothes and toys that Taehyung had always wanted. His father let him ride on his shoulders and even sit in on important meetings, perched on the armrest of the royal throne as he clapped his golden toys together. The best part of living at the palace, though, was that its people didn't treat him like he was dirt, like the nosy neighbors or street vendors from back home had always done. The people in the palace had to call him "Prince Taehyung" and bow when he passed.

Even Crown Prince Seokjin, who by all rights should have treated his illegitimate brother like a pesky threat, handled Taehyung like he was special. Seokjin cooked him sweet pastries and helped him start a garden. Every time Taehyung was pushed too hard in a lesson, scraping his knees or knuckles, he went running to his big brother. Seokjin would clean his little scratches and kiss them better once they were wrapped in soft, white gauze.

This was a bad habit that Taehyung was sure would have continued to this day, if it hadn't been for his own banishment from the palace. Taehyung, though he was an alpha, liked to be coddled. He wasn't used to assuming the role of caregiver, the sort of person mature enough to take care of someone.

Which was why he struggled now to haul Seokjin through the busy capital streets, looking around frantically for any signs they were attracting attention. Taehyung had wrapped Seokjin in his own cloak, hoping to drench his brother in the alpha scent they used as a disguise for so many years. He'd quickly learned that it didn't work as well when his brother was in heat.

He kept Seokjin close to his side, emanating the thick, heavy scent of angry alpha and snapping at anybody who brushed too close. Taehyung was amazed to find it was working. His own scent covered Seokjin's sour one, but just barely. Taehyung felt a rush of relief; he hadn't wanted to inhale that awful scent any second longer.

His brother usually smelled like crusted, sweet pastries, the kind he'd always made for Taehyung, but his heat scent was a different story. It smelled like rotting eggs and body odor, the worst kind of combination for Taehyung's delicate senses. This was because they were brothers, Mother Nature's age old way of making sure neither of them would be drawn into each other's pheromones.

Taehyung almost gagged at the thought. Civilization had come far since then, and people were better about ignoring instincts. The gross scent was more of a hindrance now than anything.

“We’re almost there, hyung,” Taehyung said tightly, grip on Seokjin tightening as he began to ramble. “You’ll like it, I think. It’s really calm and the people are so kind! And pretty! You’ll fit right in, hyung!”

His face, Taehyung thought. *What will he do when he sees his face?*

Seokjin blinked, torn face paler than when they first left the palace. The reds of his cheek contrasted against the sickly sheen of sweat on his skin. His brother looked like a ghost or even a walking corpse, eyes dark and hollow as they were. Seokjin’s mouth trembled, trying to make sounds for a few moments, but he eventually gave up, shaking his head.

“It’ll be so nice to be back. Like a vacation, you know?” Taehyung said without thinking. “We can pretend we’re just on holiday, that this is all some great adventure! It’ll be-”

The alpha let out a happy cry as the gaudy sign of the establishment came into view, a sigh of relief leaving him. “Look! We’re here.”

Seokjin, on the other hand, froze. His eyes turned into something jagged and sharp as he fixed Taehyung with a weak glare, trying to tug himself free from the alpha’s embrace. His mouth moved again, this time fueled with enough anger to move silently.

Though no sound escaped, Taehyung still flinched.

A whorehouse?

“It’s not a whorehouse,” Taehyung corrected, his brother’s words stinging. “It’s a creative establishment for patrons of the art like myself.”

Seokjin’s face twisted in disgust, but he had no other choice than to be dragged along. Another alpha bumped into them on their way inside, a middle-aged man who reeked of booze. He leaned in close enough to peer under Seokjin’s hood, drunk nose having managed to catch onto his heat scent, and Taehyung’s dagger was pressed to the alpha’s throat in an instant.

He didn’t like fighting, or even killing, but he was good at it and it served a purpose. Taehyung would do anything to keep his loved ones safe. This man had become trash as soon as he turned his attentions towards his brother.

“Leave him alone,” Taehyung warned, narrowing his eyes. He bared his teeth. “I cut apart three alphas just to get to him. You wanna be the fourth?”

The man only laughed, perhaps too drunk to sense the danger he was in. “Ah, from the looks of you two, I believe it!” he beamed and waved a finger at Seokjin. “I might have taken you up on that offer, if he weren’t carved up like he is.”

The man stumbled away after this exchange, and whereas Taehyung felt the tension leave him, his brother stiffened beside him. Taehyung could tell he wondered what the man meant, questions running through his muddled mind, but there was no way he could voice any of them.

Taehyung smiled, the expression far too stiff. “I’ll tell you later, hyung,” he promised, thinking of all the ways he could avoid that.

He asked a few girls near the entrance for Yerin, instructing them to tell the gisaeng that her

favorite customer 'V' needed help. The girls gave questioning looks over to his brother, the trembling omega by his side, and some of them were brave enough to send him glares as a result, assuming the worst. They did as they were bid, however, and a few moments later, Yerin was there in all of her resplendent glory, blonde hair coiled and twisted above her head. Her hanbok was a dark blue satin, decorated with white carnations and grey ribbon.

Yerin was the de-facto leader of this gisaeng house, which was owned by the Paek family. Taehyung had known Yerin since before he was a prince, though, and he knew her to be trustworthy, a person who would stick her neck out for Taehyung. Yerin and his mother had been childhood friends, and when they grew and parted ways, they would meet in the market at least once a week to catch up. Those meetings had stopped when the king acknowledged his illegitimate son, sweeping him away to the palace, and his mother had taken her own life at the loss.

Though that last part was a fact hidden for many years, only revealed recently by Yerin herself.

The older woman was out of breath once she reached Taehyung, painted cheeks flushed and smoky eyes smeared. She wrapped him in a hug before he could even get a word in edgewise, nearly crushing him with her strength.

"You're safe," she murmured in his ear, voice shaky. She ran a hand through his brown hair, clutching him for dear life. "Gods, I'd thought the worst!"

"Yerin," Taehyung greeted. He looked around. There was a group of men huddled around one table, tossing back one glass after another as they cheered. They had slanted boxes painted on their shirts. One of the gisaengs nearby met Taehyung's eye, gown slipping off of his shoulder to reveal a similar symbol etched on tanned skin.

"Please, can we...go somewhere more private?"

Suddenly, the warm Yerin was gone, replaced by the stern, cool leader of the gisaeng house. She let go of Taehyung instantly, glancing at the hooded figure by his side. He saw her nostrils flare, recognition dawning in her eyes. Yerin, of all people, would know that smell anywhere.

"Of course," she demurred, curtsying and gesturing to a hallway where private rooms lied in wait. "Right this way, Lord V."

As soon as the door to one of these rooms was closed and locked behind them, Taehyung reached over to rip the hood off of Seokjin's head.

"Yerin, this is my brother, Prince Seokjin. Hyung, this is Yerin."

Yerin gaped. Seokjin only stared, unmoved. Taehyung could tell he was summoning the strength to roll his eyes.

"We need a doctor or...or somebody to get him through this heat right now. It's gonna burn right through him if we don't do something," Taehyung explained hurriedly.

Yerin looked like she had more she wanted to say, questions she needed to ask. *How did they escape the palace? How was the Crown Prince an omega, when everyone was told he was an alpha? How had the Crown Prince been injured like this in the first place?*

But Yerin had spent years dealing with heats, and she could tell with one look at Seokjin how serious this was. Her need to comfort the omega before her outweighed whatever curiosity she might feel. She moved instinctively, positioning Seokjin on one of the beds and ringing a bell beside it to call for servants to help.

"Was he bitten? Mated?" she asked, deft hands moving quickly to strip his brother of his clothes. Seokjin looked affronted at the disregard for his modesty, but Taehyung took the opportunity to shoot *him* a reproachful look for once.

"No," Taehyung shook his head, swallowing. "Those were the first things I checked."

Once he'd ripped Adviser Paek away of course.

"He's burning up," Yerin murmured, placing a hand on Seokjin's forehead.

There was a knock on the door, most likely the servants that Yerin had rung for. "Don't let them in," Yerin commanded. "Just take the water and gauze, then tell them to send for a doctor. Preferably Kang."

Taehyung did as he was ordered, cracking the door open just far enough to accept the items from the servants and relaying Yerin's message. He held the bowl of water for Yerin as she dipped a rag inside, wiping the blood from Seokjin's face first. The omega's eyes fluttered, and soon after they alternated, closed then opened as the minutes passed.

"Poor thing," Yerin murmured sorrowfully, cleaning the wound on his face. "He's so handsome, too."

Taehyung wet his lips and dared to ask, "Will it scar?"

"Without a doubt," Yerin sighed. "Did you see how it happened?"

Taehyung wished that he had, if only so he could pay whoever caused it back tenfold for what they had done to his brother. "Seokjin won't take it well," he stated, fidgeting.

Yerin slowly tilted Seokjin's head up, pouring cool water into his mouth which he gulped eagerly. "The vain ones never do," she said, shaking her head.

Taehyung wondered in that moment, how many omegas Yerin had picked up off of the streets, beaten and bloodied, smelling like slick and sweat. It was probably far, far too many, a sad number that he wouldn't want to hear.

The alpha thought it was almost crazy, how quick this haven of his could be turned into a house of horrors instead, tainted forever by the sickening realization of what lay beneath the pretty faces and plush, painted skin.

Another knock on the door sounded. This time it was the doctor, an older man with a long, pointy beard. It took him a few more sniffs than Yerin to understand what was going on, and he quickly set to work, opening his box of instruments.

Yerin moved aside, and the man took her place.

"How many heats does this make it?" the doctor asked.

Taehyung paused. He tried to think back, to remember any time that Seokjin had been rendered as vulnerable as this. With a jolt of terror, he realized that there was nothing in his memories like that. Seokjin had presented before Taehyung had been brought to the palace, and while the alpha was there, he'd never witnessed a time that Seokjin had to disappear weeks at a time for heat.

"I...I don't know. He uses suppressants regularly, so..."

The doctor winced and began to put together something long and pointy from his kit. “How many have you witnessed?” he tried again.

Taehyung swallowed and finally admitted in a hoarse voice that as far as he knew, Seokjin had never experienced a heat before.

The doctor sucked in a breath so quickly that he squeaked. “Heavens, this is not ideal.”

Taehyung shifted on his feet, playing with his hands as he picked the drying specks of blood off. “What do you mean?” he wanted clarification. “Hyung is going to be okay, right? He’ll be fine, yeah?”

There was a shift in the air, a restlessness coming from somewhere, and Seokjin gave a sharp whine in response, bloodshot eyes flying open. He started to shake, to lash out, hands trying to catch either Yerin or the doctor in his panic.

Yerin looked at Seokjin, then Taehyung, and back to Seokjin again. She walked over to set the water on a nearby dresser, pointing her finger at Taehyung.

“Get out!” she barked. “You need to leave.”

That wasn’t going to happen.

Taehyung puffed out his chest, feeling something dark and angry clawing its way inside. “He’s my brother!” the alpha protested. “I’m not just going to leave him here with you people!”

Yerin’s eyes narrowed as Seokjin let out another high-pitched cry.

“Wait. Out. Side,” the woman hissed, accentuating each word with a sharp slap to Taehyung’s chest. “You’re only making things worse in here, stinking it up with your awful alpha worry. That’s the last thing he needs.”

“What does it matter? He’s just my brother,” Taehyung retorted. “We smell awful to each other anyway.”

Yerin shook her head, hands on her hips. “You’re his protector, the only family he has left now. If he senses you stressing, he’s going to stress too, and we need him calm.”

Taehyung drew in on himself at this, feeling suddenly ashamed. He trusted Yerin and her judgement in calling the doctor, as well as her ability to keep all of this secret and safe. It was the thing inside of him that thought otherwise.

I’m just worried, he assured himself. I’m worried, and I don’t want to leave Seokjin alone. He is...my brother, and therefore one half of me.

“I get it,” Taehyung said finally. “I’ll...I’ll leave.”

Several painful hours later, the door to the room opened. Yerin peeked her head out, blonde curls limp against her neck. “You can come in now, Taehyung. The worst of it is over,” she breathed.

Taehyung first saw his brother, resting peacefully on the bed, and took a deep breath. The smell of rotting eggs was no longer so thick, and Seokjin’s face had regained its normal flush of color. There was a white cloth wrapped around his cheek, hiding the injury from the rest of the world. Taehyung almost hoped it would never leave his face.

The doctor was checking Seokjin's pulse for the final time, and he gave a pleased hum at what he found. "He'll make it through this heat. It's more of a cleanse than a real heat anyways," he informed Taehyung, snapping his case shut. "But there's not much I can say for his fertility. He's taken too many suppressants for far too long."

"You don't know that for sure, though," Yerin interrupted, bristling. "The omega body is a remarkable thing."

The doctor stared at her for a moment, then cleared his throat. "Nevertheless," he said, "I wouldn't recommend giving the Crown Prince suppressants again. It will ruin his womb for good, and from the looks of things, he'll need that if he wants to survive this *mess*."

The doctor was referring to the fall of the Kim dynasty, and he had addressed Seokjin by his title. The doctor knew who Taehyung and Seokjin were. His silence would not come free.

As if on cue, the doctor gave Taehyung a greasy smile and licked his lips. "Now, my prince," he began, "with this being such a high profile case..."

If Taehyung and Seokjin's roles were reversed, Seokjin would laugh in the doctor's face and slit his throat. It would be better if Seokjin's practical methodology was put into effect now, costing them less expense and giving more assurance that their secret wouldn't be exposed by loose lips.

But Taehyung was not his brother, so he gestured to the crate that he'd brought from Paek's residence. "Gold and jewels," he offered. "All of them straight from the imperial palace. Take three of your choosing. You'll get more if you keep your silence."

The doctor tripped over his feet in his hurry to claim his payment, tongue practically lolling. Taehyung waited for him to leave with his prizes before he turned to Yerin.

"And you?" he asked softly. "Do I need to pay you as well?"

Yerin's face crumpled and she embraced him fiercely. "Never, Tae," she promised. "Never! Please, you must tell me everything! I thought you were dead!"

"Dead?" Taehyung frowned. "Why would you think that?"

Yerin looked hesitant, retracting herself from his arms. "There were whispers," the older woman admitted. "Rumors on the streets from the rebels themselves. They said they'd sent their best men to finish you off, and word had come back that your head was impaled on the spikes outside Lord Jeon's keep, courtesy of his youngest son."

Taehyung blinked. He looked to Seokjin, who was resting so peacefully and starting to smell normally. He would know what to make of that, whether they were rumors spread by clueless commoners or the beginning of something much sinister. "Well, it's not. It won't ever be. Seokjin and I are going to get out of this city once his heat passes. They won't have the chance to hurt us again."

He took a seat by his brother, grabbing a clammy hand in his own.

"Stay as long as you'd like," Yerin offered. She pressed a soft kiss to Taehyung's forehead before she left. "My home is your home. You're welcome to each and every comfort."

Taehyung murmured his thanks and turned back to Seokjin, never once taking his gaze off of his brother.

So he did not see Yerin's eyes narrow as she caught sight of a little book on the floor, partially hidden in the folds of his cloak, which had been thrown off of Seokjin's shoulders. Taehyung did not glimpse her grabbing and tucking the diary between her breasts carefully.

If he had, perhaps things would have gone differently.

Seokjin regained his senses a week later. Taehyung knew this because he'd been spending his nights in the room next door to Seokjin's own, and on the seventh day, he was woken by Seokjin's loud cries.

Taehyung rushed over, thinking that perhaps Seokjin was having a relapse, but once he'd flung the door open, the sweet smell of pastries overwhelmed his senses. He recognized the sounds for what they were. Not crying, not screaming.

Laughing.

His brother was standing half-dressed in front of his room's mirror, one hand splayed over his bared cheek. The wound had been cleaned religiously these last few days, the flesh just barely starting to stitch itself back together. It would leave a thin, jagged scar on Seokjin's face, almost like that of cracking glass.

Seokjin caught sight of Taehyung in the mirror and beamed. "My face, Taehyung! Look at it!" he giggled some more and stumbled back until his knees hit the edge of his bed.

"No one will want to marry me now!" he crowed, plopping down spread eagle.

"Hyung," Taehyung tried, wincing. "Seokjin, are you alright?"

Taehyung's words were like magic, and it was almost insane how quickly his brother could compose himself, piecing each shattered part back together again. The distressed omega disappeared, and the Seokjin that Taehyung knew took his place, sitting up.

Seokjin let out a deep breath. "It's fine," though his voice said it was anything but. "Who needs a handsome face when you're a prince?"

Neither of them brought up the fact that Seokjin was probably not considered a prince any longer by the rebel government. The two brothers just stared at each other, not knowing what to say or where to begin.

"The palace," Taehyung finally started. "What happened inside before the rebels came?"

Seokjin drew back his shoulders and told him of Min Yoongi's true allegiance, of the poison and the king's plan.

"I-I don't remember much after that. There was just the heat-the heat and...well, you," the omega admitted, stumbling over his words as he furrowed his brows.

Taehyung's mouth twisted into a frown. The king's actions were true to his character, and though Taehyung didn't know the Min heir personally, he could believe he was a traitor. Yoongi had been like a caged bird in the palace; it was clear he hated everyone there, save for Seokjin. Taehyung wanted to ask for more information, to ask about Lord Sam and the Muns, but he thought better of it. The horrors of that day would not be imparted so freely.

"That reminds me," Seokjin's eyes narrowed. "Why were you there? You should've been at your

estate when the rebels came.”

“Dowon had family in Gangwon when it fell. They told him the rebel army was marching west to the capital, so we knew they were coming soon. Then I got your letter telling me not to come to the palace. I knew I had to come get you, to make sure you were safe,” Taehyung explained, shrugging his shoulders.

It had been a curious instinct, the need to see Seokjin immediately washing over him as soon as he’d finished the letter. A sign from the Heavens, some would say. Taehyung gave most of the credit to his lineage, the ancient phoenix blood that ran through both he and Seokjin’s veins. Just the memory of that feeling had Taehyung twitching as similar agitation rose from his gut.

Seokjin fisted his hands in the bedsheets at Taehyung’s words, body trembling and eyes soft. “You shouldn’t have done that, Tae,” Seokjin murmured. “You shouldn’t have had to. Gods, if I’d just paid more attention then none of this would have-”

“Hey, what are you talking about? This isn’t your fault!” Taehyung cut in, wanting to stop that train of thought quickly. He felt angry that his brother would even think to blame himself.

Seokjin let out a frustrated growl, eyes aflame. “I know! I know I can’t really be blamed. Yoongi, the Bangtan Four-they’re the ones who did this. Their oh-so noble conquest has been built on poison of all things!”

“It wasn’t a proper fight,” Taehyung pointed out, something inside him thrumming with outrage. “If they’d wanted the Kim throne they should’ve paid the blood price for it, not sent poison to do their dirty work.”

In that moment, their eyes met. Black on black, sharp and fierce as they shined. “The debt will need to be paid,” Taehyung intoned.

“The debt will have to be paid,” Seokjin agreed in a similar fashion, pink lips curving into a grin so wide it opened the wound on his cheek. A drop of blood spilled forth, falling like a tear, and he licked it away with a swipe of his tongue.

The Kim blood ran hot and carried slumbering madness within it.

Even Taehyung, as gentle as he was, was no exception.

Though his brother could stand and walk, he had no stamina to speak of for the first few days. Seokjin would have to regain the muscle he had lost during the week he was bedridden if they wanted a fighting chance on the run. The doctor visited twice once Seokjin was awake, each time leaving with more and more of Adviser Paek's jewels.

Seokjin had eyed the man dangerously once he saw him making off with the jewelry, his killing intent clear as day, but Taehyung convinced him otherwise. It was important to keep the doctor alive in case they needed him. Though Seokjin was fine now, he could turn sick at the drop of a hat. Besides, the doctor *had* helped them. They shouldn’t repay a favor with treachery.

Waiting for Seokjin to fully recover meant that Taehyung had a lot of time on his hands within the gisaeng house. He explored it thoroughly on the first day, learning every nook and cranny, but after that he found himself bored and restless. There was nothing to do, particularly because he couldn’t find the one person he wanted to talk to.

Taehyung had found himself staring at gisaengs with short black hair more often than not, thinking

they belonged to someone familiar. Phantom images appeared as his memories tempted him. He pushed them away, knowing the memories would just hurt him more.

This tactic worked fine for awhile. Taehyung chose activities to occupy his time instead. He practiced with his sword some days, then took up a new hobby of painting on other days. He most certainly did not feel like something was missing. Everything was as it should be.

Until it wasn't. He'd been feeling particularly agitated. Seokjin had blown him off to do exercises with Yerin, and the few gisaengs he'd befriended were busy with customers. Taehyung decided to go outside, where some of the most talented gisaengs were practicing a dance routine. He didn't catch himself in time, and the memories rose up.

As he watched their limbs move deftly, skin peeking out from sleeves here and there, he thought of what he'd made himself forget. Black, fluffy hair and cherub cheeks, a sweet smile that made butterflies flutter in his tummy.

Jimin, he thought, chest aching. *Where is Jimin?*

Taehyung chided himself immediately. He shouldn't care that he hadn't seen the omega even once in all of his days here. It was Jimin who had abandoned Taehyung, not the other way around. Jimin had thrown Taehyung's feelings and promises back in his face and stepped on his heart, scoffing at his proposal.

He remembered that Jimin's eyes had been teary on that day, as if he had been so outraged that Taehyung, a bastard, would even think to propose when he had nothing to offer.

Taehyung *could* have had many things to offer Jimin: a crown, riches, the kingdom. As his father had said, however, it would have come at the cost of Seokjin's life. Taehyung had understood even then that if Jimin's love had to be bought in such a way, then he didn't want it after all.

After Taehyung had refused his father's most generous offer, he'd been banished. He sought out Jimin one last time before he left, asking him to marry him with nothing except a copper ring to his name.

And it hadn't been enough.

Taehyung felt his eyes growing wet. He'd been crying a lot lately. That probably wasn't normal, especially for an alpha. He could almost hear his father's ghost telling him to stand up straight and puff out his chest, baring his teeth to anyone who walked by.

Taehyung let out a sigh and slumped his shoulders instead.

He wanted to go back in time in that moment, to just three weeks ago, when his brother had come to visit and they'd laughed throughout the night, both carefree and happy. Now there was nothing but gloom cast over the two of them, and his brother didn't coddle him like he used to. Seokjin kept Taehyung at a distance, as if he were afraid his younger brother would see all his tiny cracks if he got too close.

Taehyung didn't have the heart to tell him that he already knew they were there. He felt the cracks in himself, too, breaking identical to his brother's own. How could he not know?

"I want to go outside," Seokjin declared the next day.

Taehyung's paintbrush stilled, smudging a section that shouldn't have been smudged. "Like, to

leave?" he asked slowly, not understanding.

"To get a feel for things," Seokjin insisted. "Yerin said there weren't any wanted posters or anything out at the market. No one knows what I look like. I should be fine."

Taehyung cocked his head to the side. "I don't think that's a good idea," he offered. "The less people that see us, the better. You told me that a week ago."

Seokjin pursed his lips. "Yerin said fresh air would do me good."

"Yerin's not a doctor, though, is she? Besides, you can get fresh air if you just step outside." Taehyung dabbed his painting with a cloth, trying to get rid of the part he'd messed up. He just made it worse.

"I need to see people, Taehyung!" Seokjin snapped, standing up from his chair. "I'm going crazy in here. I've seen only you and Yerin my entire time here. I feel like a prisoner."

Taehyung picked up his paintbrush and took a deep breath. "I just think we should be careful is all. Going out just because you feel like it? That isn't careful."

The pastry scent was becoming stronger, and Taehyung, having started to smell it for such long periods of time, found it more and more easy to recognize as Seokjin's. "Is this because I've had a heat? Because I'm an omega?" Seokjin snorted. "Well, guess what? You don't get to boss me around however you like! You're not in charge of me!"

The paintbrush snapped in Taehyung's hand. "Seokjin," he said pleasantly. "Please shut up and let me finish my painting."

Seokjin allowed it, taking his seat quietly albeit glaring all the while.

This whole thing was odd, dealing with the new dynamic between them. Taehyung had learned that the heat-or cleanse, whatever the doctor had called it-was Seokjin's first one ever. As soon as Seokjin had presented when he was twelve, their father had put him on suppressants so as to stop any heat from happening.

Because of this, Seokjin had never truly presented all the way. A month ago, Taehyung wouldn't have been able to smell the omega's true scent unless his nose was stuck in Seokjin's neck. Now he smelled him from far off. Seokjin had also lost muscle in favor of softer edges, though his waist remained as tiny as ever.

He still held himself like a beta, or even a beta prostrating as an alpha, but the animal in Taehyung understood that he was not. Taehyung felt a new desire to be heard, to not have his brother talk over him. The outcome of it was actually rather ideal. Taehyung had found the courage to speak up against his brother, while Seokjin had found the patience to listen. Nothing harmful there.

Taehyung regretted his curt words all too soon, setting his paints to the side. "Sorry, Seokjin," he apologized. "I just worry, you know? What if we attract attention and cause trouble, then the new officials get involved?"

His brother accepted the apology almost immediately, murmuring one of his own.

"That won't happen, though," Seokjin declared, folding his arms over his chest. "Not when we're together."

Taehyung agreed all too easily after that. Seokjin's unusually warm words had tugged at his

heartstrings. What else could Taehyung do but agree?

“Fine,” he sighed. “But you have to hold my hand so we don’t get separated!”

The two headed out in the morning, decked in plain robes offered by Yerin. The gisaeng had wished them luck, her normally elaborate hairstyle and fancy clothes missing. “At the first sign of trouble, you head back here,” she insisted, patting Taehyung’s cheeks. “I’ll hide you as best as I can.”

Taehyung beamed and promised he would bring her back a flower or jewelry from the market. Yerin just rolled her eyes.

Seokjin dipped his head to the gisaeng begrudgingly. He was neither a fan or an enemy of Yerin, treating her with the cool indifference he offered so many others. Taehyung saw that his brother had covered his cheek with white gauze again, even though the wound had mostly healed and the hood of his cloak should have hidden it from view. It was a vanity thing, Taehyung realized. Seokjin wanted to make *sure* no one would see it.

“C’mon, hyung! We have to stick together, yeah?” Taehyung cheered, looping his arm through Seokjin’s. “Nothing can tear us apart!”

Seokjin laughed. The omega curled his hands around Taehyung’s offered arm, leaning into him. “You’re more excited for this than me, I think.”

The market place was crowded, as Taehyung had expected, so it was a good thing they had a group grip on each other to prevent separation. The air was filled with the smell of hundreds of foods, and people from all walks of life paraded past, each hustling by on missions of their own. Vendors called out in loud, obnoxious voices as they tried to sell wares for prices that were double what they should have been.

One man hollered at Taehyung, gesturing to his table eagerly. There were shiny trinkets and baubles laid out before them, pretty stones and metals that Taehyung recognized as probable fakes. “You, sir, look like the kind of man with many pretty omegas chasing after you! Surely you need a little jewelry to keep them happy every now and then? Take your pick! I’ve got bracelets, rings, hairpins! Even collars and necklaces!”

The man took note of Seokjin’s presence, grinning. He picked up one of his collars, a gorgeous golden chain. “What about you, mister? Wouldn’t you be flattered to get one of these from such a handsome alpha?”

Seokjin ducked his head, hand slowly rising to his throat. The idea of a collar on his own neck had probably never crossed his mind before, Taehyung realized.

It was tradition for an omega to wear a collar or necklace from the alpha who wanted to court them. It meant the omega was keeping their scent glands safe, reserving them for the alpha they were promised to. Once a pair was mated, it was more common for omegas to shed their collars in favor of the bite mark they wore.

Taehyung himself had been foolish enough to gift one to Jimin. The omega had never worn it.

“Not today,” Seokjin said, voice quiet with no authority behind it. Taehyung did a double take.

Seokjin could bring grown men crying to their knees with just a word. Now he was quiet and shy. Had the thought of wearing a collar reduced him to such a state?

“The greatest gift is his company,” his brother simpered, lowering his head once more.

Taehyung suppressed a laugh, realizing then that Seokjin was playing a role. “Oh, darling!” he chimed in dramatically. “Come, let’s go to the place we first met! We can watch the sun set later, just as we did long ago!”

Once they were far enough away, they broke out into laughter. “Why does everyone not know we’re brothers?” Taehyung asked through his giggles. “Are their noses broken?”

“Family members have similar scents, yes, but you have to admit we don’t smell anything alike,” Seokjin shrugged one shoulder half-heartedly, smiling. “For those who get a good look, I think it would help if we looked more alike. We both take after our mothers.”

That made more sense. It probably also threw people off when they saw an unmated alpha and omega together; the first assumption was that they were courting. Taehyung found all of it hilarious, especially throughout the morning as more people assumed it. Seokjin was a good actor, playing the submissive omega perfectly, and yet Taehyung could sense that it was wearing down on him.

After years of hiding his true nature, Seokjin was finally getting a taste of the treatment omegas received. Needless to say, he didn’t like it.

Vendors always addressed Taehyung, acknowledging Seokjin only when Taehyung mentioned his presence. Though Seokjin’s fine features were covered, it was clear they could tell by his scent he was an omega. When the vendors did speak to his brother, it was in soft, patronizing tones, as if they didn’t think he could understand a word they said.

Eventually Seokjin tired of this. He’d most likely seen enough of Western dresses and one too many omegan hanboks to count. While Taehyung was inspecting an expensive set of paints, he tugged on the alpha’s sleeve, jerking his head in the direction of a downtrodden tavern.

“Come on,” Seokjin urged softly. “Fun’s over. We should get the information we came for now.”

Taehyung wilted, but only a little. He had almost forgotten what it was they came for. All of his doubt and hesitance had been pushed away by the sight of the marketplace, something he hadn’t seen in a very long time.

There were several groups of men drinking inside the tavern, the majority being poorly dressed and dirty. They gave Taehyung mean glares, but the alpha only shot them a smile as Seokjin guided him to one of the battered tables in the corner.

“What’s the deal with this place?” Taehyung wondered out loud. Seokjin must have had a reason for choosing it. He always had his reasons.

Seokjin frowned, delicately placing his hands on the table. It wobbled precariously. “One of my servants had a source stationed at this tavern. Gossip falls fast when alcohol pries lips open,” he admitted lightly.

Taehyung stared at him, a little amazed. Seokjin had people everywhere.

“What can I do for you, sirs?” a cheery voice asked. A young girl stood beside them, balancing a tray of alcohol in her hand. She looked them up and down.

“You’re far from home, young masters,” she commented, teasing.

Seokjin smiled tightly. “We’re looking for the Black Boar. Do you happen to know where we can find them?”

The humor vanished from the girl’s eyes, and she clutched the tray a little closer. “Depends,” she said cautiously. “Who wants to know?”

Taehyung glanced back at Seokjin. The omega folded his hands together, and Taehyung could tell he was searching for the right answer.

Finally-

“A friend of Jae’s,” Seokjin decided, voice quiet.

Taehyung stilled, and suddenly there was a lump in his throat. He couldn’t focus on that, though, because the next moment had the girl reaching inside of her shirt, pulling forth a small, black totem. She placed it on the table gently.

A boar.

"Now," she whispered, eyes sad, “what is it that Jae’s friend wants to know?”

Seokjin asked. She answered.

When it was done, and they had learned all they needed to know, Taehyung felt a little hollow. As he sat witness to their conversation-which was just a dull exchange of information, really-he’d felt similar to an outsider. A quiet grieving process had passed between the two, though Seokjin would never admit it if asked.

The Black Boar informed them that just as the rebels had swept through the city, so too did their reforms. The law enforcement officers chosen by the former king had been dismissed. Bangtan soldiers who had proven themselves on the battlefield replaced them. The court soon filled with the staunchest of Bangtan supporters; those from the Min, Jeon, Jung, and Woo clans made the palace their home now. Prince Seokjin was believed to have escaped to Qing, while Lord Jeon’s son had killed Prince Taehyung in his sleep. here was a coronation to be held several months from now, crowning the leader of the Bangtan Four as king. The king’s infamous palace massacre had left behind a shortage of servants. The Bangtan rebels were accepting hundreds of candidates as servants to prepare for the upcoming coronation.

“Everything is going just as they like,” Seokjin murmured as they left the tavern, his eyes narrowed into slits. “The people think us dead and gone. No one mourns. Everyone cheers.”

Taehyung placed a hand on his elbow. “They won’t for long,” he grumbled. “What business do those snakes have running a government? They can’t even fight a proper war. General Mun would have cut through them all with his eyes closed.”

Seokjin’s shoulders shook, and he clutched the hood around his face tighter. “I won’t let them!” he hissed. “I waited so long. I fought and killed...I did what I had to so I could survive in that palace. Now they’ve taken everything from me, my birthright and my body.”

Taehyung was going to agree, to promise his brother they’d both stop at nothing for revenge, if he hadn’t been suddenly distracted.

Something barely hidden among the crowd caught his eye. It glinted in the sunlight-a polished emerald held by a golden chain. It was the necklace he’d given to Jimin as a courting gift. Taehyung moved without really thinking about it, letting go of Seokjin.

He heard his brother call his name, voice authentically alarmed and frightened, but he ignored it. Taehyung was drawn away by the enchanting sight of the figure who wore the necklace, dressed in light blue robes, a pink carnation stuck in the intricate coils of silky, black hair. It was as if a haze clouded Taehyung's mind, making him blind to everything else except the familiar body before him.

Jimin, he thought, darting after the figure.

"Jimin!" Taehyung called. The man kept walking.

He didn't know how far he ran, only that it felt like forever. Eventually he was close enough to reach out, his fingertips just barely, barely grazing the hem of the light blue hanbok sleeve, when the figure before him disappeared in an instant, turning to ash and scattering to the wind. Taehyung thought he heard Jimin's tinkling laugh, mocking him like he had that awful day months ago.

The alpha stopped and stood for a few moments, simply staring at his hand. He turned it over once, twice, pondering whether he had really witnessed Jimin in the first place. Had it all been in his head? Probably. His skin itched, as if someone was watching him, and he thought of Min Yoongi, who was rumored to have been born from a witch, and his father, who had a sect of shamans dedicated to cursing his enemies.

Magic, he realized, faltering.

Taehyung remembered where he was supposed to be, who he was supposed to be with. He wanted to kick himself. He'd done the one thing he'd sworn not to do: leave Seokjin alone. The alpha tried to backtrack, but it was harder than it should've been. He had taken more turns than he'd thought. Eventually he gave up on relying on memory alone, stopping to ask one of the old ladies who ran a fruit stand where the tavern was.

She pointed one way, rattling off directions. Taehyung bowed and sprinted away before she'd even finished.

He made it to the tavern, but Seokjin wasn't where he'd left him. Taehyung looked around wildly, skin buzzing with something wrong and cold. There weren't many people here anymore, most a little ways off-

A crowd of them. All of them staring, watching with wide eyes and gaping mouths. Horror and shock coiled in the air and drifted over to where Taehyung stood. His stomach dropped.

The alpha made himself move, striding over and pushing the bystanders aside with little effort. What were they watching, so disturbed and yet fascinated by?

It was Seokjin.

Seokjin and what remained of Mun Kai.

For a moment, Taehyung thought he was back in the palace, seeing his pale, blood-stained brother barely breathing as he stood over a corpse he'd surely torn to shreds. But no, he'd left the palace and the memory of his brother like that behind.

Hadn't he?

Taehyung made to move forward, lips barely opening to cry, "Hyung!"

The scream died in his throat as he caught sight of the new law enforcement officers, all outfitted

in the silver clothes of the Bangtan dynasty. They grabbed at Seokjin, and it took four of them to pull him away from Kai's body. Seokjin's gauze dangled off his cheek, mark bright and terrible, and he snarled, teeth bared viciously at the soldiers. He would not make it easy for them. This, Taehyung knew.

One of the soldiers spoke, voice loud and clear enough for Taehyung to hear. "Is this the guy?"

Another nodded. "He's the one we've been looking for."

Taehyung let out a cry. Did it mean what he thought? They knew who Seokjin was?

His brother whipped his head around as they tried to drag him off, sensing or perhaps even hearing Taehyung's soft cry. His eyes met Taehyung's and his mouth opened, a firm silent command issued.

Run, Seokjin mouthed.

Taehyung had never been good at listening to his elder brother. He'd ignored his advice to avoid the palace, and he would ignore his advice again. The alpha felt that inner instinct he'd tried so hard to suffocate suddenly start to claw its way up, tearing his reason and sense of self apart. He was no longer Taehyung, but something else. A creature that felt more than he should've, driven by the need to protect his brother, to kill anything that got in his way.

And he would have, if it weren't for Yerin's dainty hands which jabbed against the pressure points along his neck.

Chapter End Notes

who will seokjin meet next chapter? hoseok?? Namjoon?? Yoongi?? place your votes...there will also be a special POV next chapter from one of the characters we have yet to see, hmmm

Spot "The Other Boleyn Girl" quote!!

one reader guessed it, the king was based off of Aerys Targaryen from Game of Thrones! i am a huge Game of Thrones fan, which is another source of inspiration for this fic lol

feel free to comment your thoughts and theories!! xoxo they fuel my writing habits lol and thank you for sticking with me in regards to the wait!

ALSO this fic now has [FANART](#) !! Go check it out, it's perfect (๑~๑)

find me on [tumblr](#) and [twitter](#)

i post fic progress and plot points on twitter lol if any of you care about that

A New Servant Named Jin

Chapter Summary

Seokjin faces what should be his sentencing, if it weren't for the fact he'd just done the Bangtan Four a favor.

(TW: graphic violence, brief nonconsensual groping/touching)

Chapter Notes

blows kisses ask and ye shall receive

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

One second Taehyung was there. The next he was not.

Seokjin blinked and called out for his brother, a sharp note of panic in his voice. Taehyung either didn't hear him or didn't care, and soon the alpha was lost in the dirty, bustling crowd. Seokjin felt something in him whine, notably distressed, and even his hands started to shake.

He's left me by myself, Seokjin thought, *even though he'd been so worried before*.

That didn't make any sense. The two had promised to stick together, so why had Taehyung wandered off all of a sudden, as if he were in a daze of some sorts? Seokjin felt a cool breeze brush against the back of his neck, and he looked in the direction of where it had come, meeting the gaze of the first vendor who had spoken to Taehyung. The man's lips were slowly curving into a malicious grin, and his brown eyes glowed a radiant silver. The vendor winked at Seokjin, and a second later, there was a hand on the prince's wrist.

Seokjin opened his mouth, ready to scream, but the assailant's other hand stuck itself between his teeth. The prince turned his head, just barely managing to catch sight of Mun Kai's face before the alpha dragged him into an alleyway.

The alpha released him as soon as they were away from the crowd, his tight features relaxing into relief. "You're alright," Kai sighed, looking him up and down. "The doctor had told me you were, but I wouldn't believe him until I saw it for myself."

The doctor? Fear began to eat at Seokjin's nerves, and he wanted nothing more than for Taehyung to be by his side. Though it was just him and Kai in the alley, he felt a hundred pairs of eyes on him. Each of them stripped him bare as they waited patiently to see his weaknesses, of which Seokjin now had many.

This was the worst possible scenario for Seokjin, who still carried traces of heat on his skin, to be alone with the rash alpha who'd made attempts at courting him in the past. His worry was justified when Kai leaned in close, nose just barely brushing Seokjin's neck as he took a deep breath, and the alpha's clammy hand came up to finger the edges of Seokjin's bandages.

“Oh, Seokjin,” he gasped. “You smell so good!”

Seokjin recoiled and shoved his hands forward, pushing Kai far, far away from his scent gland. The alpha smelled horrible, like wilting flowers, and Seokjin wanted no part of it.

“What are you doing here, Kai?” Seokjin asked disdainfully, turning up his nose.

Kai wilted at the prince’s words and began to fumble for his own to say. “You mean you aren’t happy to see me?” he eventually muttered.

Seokjin merely stared at him, unimpressed. “Why should I be?” he spat.

The alpha furrowed his brow reached out once more. “But Seokjin-”

Seokjin slapped the hand away before it could graze his face once more. “What. Are. You. Doing. Here. Don’t you know where we are, you fool? Don’t you know what’s happening? You should’ve gathered your father’s forces, not come looking for me!”

“I had to protect you,” Kai said, like it was obvious. “You’re the Crown Prince, the king’s only heir. Where else would I go?”

The alpha’s stupidity frustrated Seokjin so much he feared he would cry. “The palace perhaps? Didn’t you think of your family even once?”

Seokjin thought of General Mun, reaching for his mate even in death, and took in a deep, shaky breath. Hadn’t their son worried for them?

“You’re my family, Seokjin,” the alpha murmured, eyes turning heated and vulgar. “Or at least you will be.”

The prince wanted to vomit, stomach rolling in disgust, but he pushed the urge down. Seokjin shook his head furiously, and his eyes felt rather wet. Everything he had pushed down, all of his frustration and anger, began to spill out.

“Gods, why are you this dull? Haven’t I made it clear enough? I never planned on mating you. I never wanted to mate you. You’re arrogant and stupid and smell like something dead. If you really wanted to help me, you would’ve died along with everyone else!”

Seokjin had to catch his breath after this, and he felt hollowed out and empty, the multitude of emotions that had been motivating him gone so very suddenly. Kai wasn’t saying anything, not protesting or crying. Seokjin looked over and met the alpha’s eyes. Kai stared at him, his face blank and eyes hard, looking every part the threatening alpha he could be. Seokjin realized instantly that he had gone too far as the air spiked with anger.

“I should have left you to wither out here,” Kai said simply. He shook his head. “I went through all this trouble, paid off the doctor and witch, yet you’re this ungrateful.”

“Kai,” Seokjin started, adopting a pleasant tone. “Listen, I didn’t mean-”

“Whether you wanted it or not, we would’ve mated. Your father had already approved of it,” Kai informed him coldly. “I wasn’t just some lovesick fool pining after you. I had only hoped you’d have warmed to the idea of our marriage more quickly if I left you those gifts.”

Seokjin stepped back a few feet, instincts screaming at him to run while he still could as the alpha advanced on him. Only now did Seokjin notice the weariness to Kai’s form, the gauntness of his

face and cut on his lip.

“I left my post for you,” the alpha said quietly. “I’d heard the whispers of what those rebels had planned for you, and I came to find you. Because if they’d planned those things knowing you were a beta, then what would they do once they stripped you and saw your cunt?”

Seokjin flinched, as the vulgar acknowledgement of his sex packed a punch. The prince brought his hand behind him, trying to discreetly get ahold of the dagger strapped to his outer thigh. He backed up once more, but for every step Seokjin took back, Kai took two forward. The prince inhaled through his mouth only, not wanting to smell Kai’s heavy scent, and summoned the courage to speak.

“So what?” he shrugged a shoulder, though his voice trembled. “Did you think you would waltz in and save me, then take this cunt for yourself?”

Kai’s features formed a smile, and though at first it was reminiscent of his sire, this one was uglier and meaner. “But of course,” he rumbled. “Isn’t that how the stories always go?”

Seokjin’s fingers found the outline of the blade through his clothes. Just as Kai pounced, he tore the cloth at the seams with a loud ripping sound, bearing his leg to the cold air. Kai hit Seokjin in the chest before he could get a good grip on the holster, and the impact sent the two of them out of the alleyway, into the crowded streets again.

Kai grabbed at Seokjin, hands roaming everywhere that they most certainly should not. Seokjin wanted to cut them off. He reached down, searching for the dagger once more, but Kai held his wrist up above his head, forcing it into the dirt as Seokjin squirmed and wriggled. Kai settled his weight on top of Seokjin, preventing any chance of escape.

“Get off of me!” the prince hissed, gut rolling unpleasantly. “Get off! Get off! Get off!”

Kai sneered. “Oh, I’ll be getting off, alright!”

He drew back his lips and leaned in close to Seokjin’s scent glands once more, intending to sink his teeth there in the mockery of a mating bite. The situation felt too familiar, the scent and weight above him so triggering that something dark danced behind Seokjin’s eyes.

He was back in the palace again and there were hands all over him, touching at his chest and grabbing his crotch. The heat blurred most of his reason, but Seokjin was still aware of how unwanted all of it was, and suddenly he was angry, blood spiking hot as it raged. Seokjin had used pieces of broken glass to cut up Lord Sam, but for the most part, his bare hands did all of the work.

The strength came to him easily once he lost himself in the memory, and in one quick movement, he found what he needed, bringing it up into Kai’s gut before the alpha could deliver the bite. Seokjin jerked the dagger, curving up as he scrambled the alpha’s insides. The action was familiar and practiced, so much like what he’d done to Lord Sam.

Seokjin pushed Kai off of him, the alpha’s body flopping to the side as he clutched at his stomach. The stink of alpha was strong, too much, and so Seokjin continued digging the knife down into Kai, who gurgled and jerked one final time. The light left his eyes, but Seokjin pressed on, perhaps still lost in his own mind.

It was only when the Bangtan soldiers were there, pulling Seokjin off of Kai, that he even realized what he’d just done. He felt the wound on his face sting, exposed to the air, and quiet greeted him as hundreds stared in horror.

Seokjin's face twisted into a sneer, and he wanted to crow, *Are you all just going to stand there?*

He felt hands grabbing at him, and his mouth drew back in a snarl. "Don't touch me!" Seokjin hissed, jerking away from one soldier only to have three more take his place. There were too many of them, a whole squad. One of the soldiers took the dagger from his hands while another pushed at his shoulder, fist harsh and unforgiving.

"Is this the guy?" one grunted.

Seokjin stopped struggling, stilling for but a moment. *They couldn't possibly mean...*

"He's the one we've been looking for," another soldier agreed, head bobbing as he grimaced.

It felt as if the world had been twisted upside down, as if Seokjin had the worst luck possible. Tears stung his eyes, but he would not give the crowd the satisfaction of seeing them.

Then Seokjin thought he heard a cry, so familiar that his chest ached, and he whipped around, eyes immediately zeroing in on Taehyung's face within the crowd. He saw the desperation in his brother's face, the anger and determination.

Run, Seokjin mouthed, eyes hard.

But Seokjin saw—he *understood*—that there would be no stopping his brother. He knew that his brother would tear himself apart just to keep Seokjin safe. So when he saw Yerin incapacitate Taehyung from behind, he thanked every deity he knew of, if only because his brother would live to see another day.

He could not say the same for himself.

The soldier's hands dug into his back, urging him onwards, and Seokjin had no choice but to follow. His first thought was that he would be sent to the block immediately. These soldiers knew who he was, didn't they? So what was stopping them from getting rid of the last threat to the new Bangtan dynasty, right here and now?

The same soldier jerked his head at one of the others. "We'll need to take back the body. The officers at the palace will make sure it's the right guy."

This one was their leader then, Seokjin surmised. He took a moment to calm his thoughts, rearranging them as he tried to process what was going on. It was Kai they were talking about.

The soldier looked at Seokjin and frowned. "They'll have to decide what we do with this one, too."

This one. As if his position wasn't even worth mention, as if they had no idea of who he was. Seokjin felt it come to him, then, that these men had not been looking for the Crown Prince, but Mun Kai, who was now dead. Seokjin was an ordinary omega to these men. At most, perhaps he would get a jail sentence for having killed an alpha, especially in broad daylight as he had, disturbing the peace. Seokjin's mind whirled. If he played his card right, however, and turned himself into a helpless victim, he could get off with nothing more than a slap on the wrist.

"I-I didn't mean to," Seokjin started to blubber, twisting this way and that as he tried to break free. "Honest, I didn't! He just wouldn't stop."

He saw the uneasy glances some soldiers shot each other, yet they remained unmoved. He was taken away, hauled along a familiar path, and Seokjin got the feeling that they were headed to the palace.

Seokjin fumbled, hands still slick with blood. "Please!" he begged. "Let me go! I don't want to die!"

"Look, we just need to get you out of here, alright?" one of the soldiers hissed close to his ear.

The prince obeyed, if only to see what their next move was. He stopped fighting them. He did protest, however, if their hands became too harsh, surely bruising his delicate skin.

Though they didn't take Seokjin straight to the palace, they dragged him somewhere far too close to it. The dark prison that greeted Seokjin was emptier than it should have been, with hardly a criminal in sight.

"Where are all the prisoners?" Seokjin asked, frowning.

"Released," one soldier explained. He gave Seokjin a funny look. "Haven't you heard?"

Seokjin swallowed, mouth suddenly dry. Had the rebels given all state prisoners a pardon? The thought made him sick. Not all had been unjustly imprisoned by his father; most had deserved their sentences, serving out the rest of their lives as murderers, rapists, and thieves.

A cell was unlocked, and the soldier in charge pushed Seokjin inside. Seokjin fell to his knees with a wince, barely catching himself before his face could hit the dirty ground.

"You'll wait here until our boss arrives. He'll know what to do with you," the soldier informed him.

Was Yoongi their boss? Or was it one of the other Bangtan Four? Seokjin could only be so lucky.

Seokjin sniffled, the action hopefully not too dramatic. "I didn't mean to kill him," he promised. "I swear it!"

The soldier who had thrown him in the cell stared disbelievingly. "You butchered that alpha," he stated, perhaps a little disgusted. "Don't you dare say you didn't mean it."

Seokjin's eyes narrowed a fraction, but he covered the action with his hands as he let out a whine, hunching in on himself. The soldier in charge was yet again unmoved. Seokjin took a discreet whiff of the air. Ah, he was a beta. That explained it.

"Aren't you being a little too harsh?" another soldier chimed in, watching from the door of the prison. He was an alpha. "At least hear his side of the story."

"Lord Min told me that if I found an omega with Mun Kai, I was to treat him with a healthy dose of suspicion. He's clearly not an innocent in all of this."

Seokjin bit his tongue, wanting nothing more than to lash out, but that was what the beta wanted. He chose to whimper some more, but every sound that came out of his mouth was like a knife to his stomach. He hated having to put on the air of a weak omega more than anything else.

The alpha at the doorway bristled. It seemed that out of everyone gathered, Seokjin's crying bothered him the most. How predictable. "He's an injured omega," the alpha puffed up, moving closer. "And you would treat him in such a way?"

A few other murmurs rose up in agreeance.

"An injured omega who happens to be a murderer," the other soldier scoffed. "The least he can do

is serve some jail time for his crime. Or are you implying the new laws shouldn't be applied equally?"

The alpha was in front of the leader now, nearly nose to nose with the beta as he indiscreetly challenged his authority. Seokjin assessed the situation calmly, even as his pheromones flared up, presumably agitating them even more.

The spark would catch any moment now, the tension in the air too great, and Seokjin waited patiently, crossing his legs as he sat to watch the chaos unfold. The alpha opened his mouth, and Seokjin was sure he would have snarled out some expletive, if it hadn't been for the interruption.

"What's going on here?" a new, deeper voice growled.

The alpha and beta sprang apart instantly, going meek and quiet as the others parted like the sea for the newcomer, who was dressed in similar greys and browns. Seokjin knew instantly that this stranger was ranked higher-far, far higher than anyone here-as the alpha stepped forth with such an impressive, heavy presence that even Seokjin felt himself quiver. He must be their commanding officer, or something like it.

Tanned skin stretched over taut muscles. Brown eyes both dangerous and warm. The alpha wore a thick, burgundy scarf around his neck and leather black gloves covered his hands. Something in Seokjin stilled, perhaps shocked. He found himself refusing to take a whiff of the air. He didn't want to know what the alpha smelled like, afraid that he would like it.

Seokjin wanted so much to straighten his back and roll his shoulders, to stand and see how his height matched up to this alpha's. Some part of him wanted to prove something, to meet the alpha's gaze head-on.

But he couldn't.

Instead, Seokjin cowered like the coward they expected him to be, even as the proof of his strength-Mun Kai's drying blood-cracked on his face.

The alpha looked Seokjin up and down. Whatever he saw had his eyes softening and he visibly swallowed. Seokjin didn't like it.

"C-captain!" the head soldier stuttered, snapping to attention. "I was told Lord Min was to oversee this investigation."

"Lord Min is indisposed at the moment," the captain said coolly. He gestured a gloved hand to the cell where Seokjin sat. "This is him, then? The omega who killed Mun Kai?"

The soldiers murmured their assent, and Seokjin flinched.

The captain crouched so he was eye level with Seokjin, who shivered at the attention. The alpha's eyes lingered on his cheek, noticeably clouding over with pity, and Seokjin wanted nothing more than to gouge them out.

The alpha smiled, unaware of these thoughts. "Well, it looks like a thanks is in order."

Seokjin frowned, staring at the hand suspiciously. "What for, Lord....?"

"Joon," the alpha said, not missing a beat. "Captain Joon. And you are?"

Seokjin was a master of lying, and he realized there could be no fantastical lies or absolute truths

given here. He'd need a mixture of both if he wanted to cover his tracks. "Jin," he said shyly, voice quivering.

Captain Joon paused. "After the former prince?"

Seokjin nodded.

There were hundreds of men across the kingdom with variants of his name. They were likely around the same age, too, as it was tradition for the common folk to name their own children after newborn royalty. It was a small reach towards what would never be theirs. Seokjin, knowing there would be less slip-ups if he used his own name, gave it to the captain here without a second thought.

"What happened to you?" Joon gestured to his face, to his bloody hands and cloak.

Straight to the point.

"That alpha...he...he liked the way I smelled. I just had a heat last week, you see, and he caught a whiff of me in the streets. I didn't think anything when he approached me at first. I...I was stupid. I should've known...should've seen-" A strangled gasp was pulled from Seokjin's throat, a little more real than he would have liked. He covered his face once more.

Captain Joon shushed him, and his voice was far too gentle when he spoke next. "You couldn't have known," he murmured. "Whatever he did to you, it wasn't your fault. We won't blame you for protecting yourself, alright?"

He heard the beta soldier make some sort of noise, protesting, but he fell in line shortly, being no match for this alpha. Seokjin let out a whine at the captain's absolution. Behind his hands, his lips tugged upwards in a smirk. He only hoped his eyes weren't smiling as well as he peeked between his fingers to meet Joon's steady gaze. A shiver went through him at the sight. Though the captain's words had been soothing, his stare was anything but. It held a cool steadiness to it, like still, dark water.

Seokjin suddenly felt a little afraid.

"His name was Mun Kai," Captain Joon explained. "We've been looking for him ever since the Uprising. He's on our most wanted list."

"O-oh no," Seokjin murmured. "I didn't mean to-"

Joon shook his head. "You did us a favor, really," he said. "He could've raised up an army and razed all of our progress to the ground. If it weren't for you, who knows when we would have caught him."

"So he was an imperialist," Seokjin murmured, as if just now realizing the fact.

"Yes, he was. It's like I said, we owe you one now."

"We?" Seokjin asked weakly. He already knew, though. A part of him had understood immediately that this man was an enemy, one of the Bangtan rebels who had taken his home for their own.

Captain Joon only smiled. "Are you employed?"

The question sent a hundred more running through Seokjin's head. The prince wrung his sullied hands, swallowing. "No," he said carefully. "Though the Heavens know I've tried. There aren't

many...respectable places of work for omegas around here.”

The alpha nodded, making a pleased noise in the back of his throat. “Have you ever thought of working at the palace?”

Seokjin tilted his head to the side. “Like a servant?”

It was unthinkable.

“You’ll have a roof over your head and a belly full of food.” When Seokjin did not jump for joy, the captain looked at him meaningfully. “And no one will touch you. I’ll give you my word.”

Seokjin saw multiple winding paths spread out before him, each carefully threaded and mended, leading straight to the pulsing, bared heart of his enemy. What was once unthinkable quickly took the form of a clever disguise, one the Bangtan rebels would never see coming. Why would the Crown Prince still use his real name, let alone work as a servant under the rebels who took his home?

He was being given access to the palace-the headquarters of Bangtan operations-and all he’d had to do for it was stick a knife in Mun Kai. It was almost too easy, too good to be true. Seokjin had to take a deep breath to steady his excitement, as a sudden eagerness to agree would seem too suspicious.

He jutted his chin out. “Not even this new king I’ve heard about? Could your word protect me from him as well?”

For some reason, the captain’s lips twitched. “Most definitely. He’s not king yet, and things are run a lot more democratically now.”

Preposterous, Seokjin thought. *What does that even mean?*

Captain Joon held out a gloved hand through the bars of the cell. Seokjin stared at it a moment. The man maintained his distance, and yet exhibited a certain degree of empathy. It was fascinating.

“Alright,” Seokjin said softly. “On your word, Captain Joon.”

He took the alpha’s hand in his own, leather rough and unforgiving, as he tried so very hard not to tremble.

Captain Joon left as quick as he’d come, like a whisper on the wind, and Seokjin remained in the hands of the soldiers. Most of them treated him the same as they had earlier, perhaps a little kinder even.

The beta soldier who’d been so viciously against him had merely shook his head, disgusted. “You’re a lucky son of a bitch,” he growled. “I hope you know that.”

Seokjin wondered fleetingly what it was about Captain Joon that allowed him to swoop in and command such respect, that these spirited, hotheaded soldiers would follow his orders without a doubt. A part of Seokjin didn’t ever want to find out.

Having been deemed harmless, there were only two soldiers responsible for bringing him to the palace. He was surprised to find that, for the most part, his former home was untouched. The gates, wooden and towering, opened to reveal the familiar fixtures and decor of the Kim dynasty. A large crimson banner spread out along the front of the palace, embroidered in white with a sweeping

phoenix. Seokjin drew in a sharp breath at the four smaller banners hanging below it. There was an individual color and creature assigned to each banner—a blue falcon with its talons curled, a black bat hanging upside down, a green dragon with its wings spread out, and a gold griffin roaring with all its might. To any common passerby, they were just pretty decorations, but Seokjin had understood the significance of them right away.

For hundreds of years, the imperial Kim family had been the only family with a sigil to their name. It placed them above the other nobility, on an entirely separate level where they belonged. Now, however, there were four more sigils put up alongside the Kim phoenix, and Seokjin knew without a doubt who they belonged to. Jung, Min, Woo, and Jeon. The families of the Bangtan Four.

Seokjin's glare burned holes in the fabric that mocked his home, daring to put traitorous rebels on the same level as the prestigious Kim dynasty. It was a slight he would not soon forget.

The soldiers took his indignance as awe, commenting on how beautiful the palace looked, and Seokjin swallowed back his scathing remarks. He simply nodded his head, unable to even lie.

His escorts took him to the other side of the estate, where the water maidens were responsible for hanging out the laundry to dry. Indeed, a group of weary servants were gathered, doing just as Seokjin predicted. A young woman with freckles approached the group of soldiers. She balanced a basket of linens on one hip, and at the sight of Seokjin, her lips pursed.

“What's this, Hiro?” she asked curtly, addressing the soldier to Seokjin's left.

“A new servant!” Hiro blurted out.

The woman raised an eyebrow. “He looks more like a madman than anything else. And he's hurt. You think he can work with an injury like that?”

“Captain Joon told us to leave him with you. He wanted us to bring him right away. All of this is a...delicate matter,” the other soldier spoke up.

The woman glanced over to Seokjin, who met her gaze without flinching. This woman obviously didn't want to see someone weak, but someone sturdy who could work for hours on end. Seokjin would give her that.

“Has he passed the background checks? The screenings?” she asked.

The soldiers fidgeted. After a moment, Hiro spoke up, his voice unsteady. “We were thinking we should just leave all of that with you. You're pretty much the servant in charge now, Maria.”

Maria rolled her eyes. “Fine,” she muttered. “The both of you would be useless anyways.”

The soldiers scurried off quickly, all too glad to leave Seokjin in the hands of Maria, just as Captain Joon had commanded them. The alpha had even more sway in this palace than Seokjin had thought.

Maria set down her basket and called to the other servants. “Finish up here, then move on to the west wing,” she ordered. “Don't send for me unless it's important.”

A few servants murmured their assent, while others ignored her. It was so very easy to tell that all of this was new to them. These weren't people meant for the palace; many of them were too ugly or disobedient to have even been allowed in during his father's reign.

How did that saying go again?

Beggars can't be choosers, Seokjin thought with relish.

Maria approached him and took one of his dirtied hands in her own, inspecting it. She let out a whistle. "What's this? I thought it may have been clay, but..."

"Blood," Seokjin said, making sure his voice was loud enough for the others to hear. "I killed someone for those soldiers. That's why I'm here."

The servants froze, each of them jerking their heads to stare at Seokjin. Maria let Seokjin's hand fall from her own. "Funny," she said dryly. "But I don't believe that for a second."

A few of the servants gave weak chuckles, then set about back to work. Seokjin merely shrugged his shoulders, smiling as Maria began to lead him away. It didn't matter to him whether this woman believed him or not.

"Your hands are calloused enough to have held a sword, but not so rough that you're used to labor. What did you do before this?" Maria questioned him as they walked.

Seokjin tried to think of something clever, but nothing came to mind immediately. He was an omega now, which limited his options. His dynamic couldn't find very many jobs. "I lived at a gisaeng house before," was all Seokjin could say.

He hoped that sentence alone would stop Maria from probing too far into his past.

It did.

"Oh," Maria muttered. She moved on to another topic. "Do you know how to cook or clean? Maybe mend clothes? Any of that?"

"I can cook," Seokjin admitted, eyes glancing around the hallways. He didn't know what he'd do if he encountered Min Yoongi here and now. His fingers itched, the blood there dried. Seokjin thought of Yoongi's soft, unblemished face.

Pretty faces were one of the only weapons omegas had in this world. Seokjin had been rid of his. It would only be fair if he and Yoongi matched.

They came to a stop in front of a small, worn door. Seokjin had to pretend he didn't know where he was. "This is..." he trailed off.

"The servants' baths," Maria said. She opened it, and a wave of steam spilled out of the room. Seokjin basked in the heat, eyes nearly rolling to the back of his head. The baths smelled lilacs and spices, so very familiar to his own private bath in the palace.

"Go inside and wash yourself off. We can't have you looking like that if you're going to work here," Maria inclined her head. "I'll wait outside."

Seokjin murmured his thanks. Maria was more generous than he had thought, allowing such privacy, but once Seokjin stepped inside, he understood that he wouldn't be truly alone for his bath. There were three servants in the baths. One of them was cleaning up, folding towels and positioning oils here and there. The other two were splashing each other and laughing as they bathed.

The prince took a deep breath and clutched his torn cloak tight to his chest. The three servants paid him no mind, continuing their tasks. He scooted to the edge, so his back would be to the wall, and

slowly untied the strings of his cloak. He let it slip from his form, and soon the robes Yerin had given him fell away as well. There was only the thin, white slip underneath left. Some of Kai's blood had soaked through, and it looked a right mess, splattered red here and there.

Seokjin was not normally ashamed of his body. He had never once shied away from undressing in front of servants and yet now he found himself pausing. He thought of his body, the curves along his hips that shouldn't be there and softness of his stomach. Seokjin hadn't had any of that before his heat. He'd been more androgynous, more like the beta he was pretending to be. Now everything was different. He'd fully experienced a heat, and he'd never be mistaken as anything other than an omega again.

Just as his body had readied for a child, it would soon ready in disappointment for his bleeding. They came first during a presentation, and then only weeks after a fruitless heat. Seokjin wished that the soft slopes of his body would bleed away, too-perhaps fall and rot off.

He fingered the top of his slip, grazing the skin along his upper back. He would need to guard that area with his life. If the Kim phoenix spilled forth for the world to see, there would be no more hiding. The next thing for Seokjin would be the hangman's noose.

But would that be so bad? A dark, small part of him thought.

Seokjin had to smother it. He couldn't die, not yet at least. He had revenge to serve and a person to protect. If he could just get close enough to the Bangtan Four...Once Seokjin achieved that, he'd be able to strike them where it hurt and watch them fall one by one, right after the other.

In one smooth motion, Seokjin tugged the white slip over his face and slid into the water. As he began to clean his hands and arms of Kai's blood, he couldn't help but think he was cleaning himself too. Of his worries and regrets, of the anxiety that pooled in his stomach and the self-loathing that bubbled up his throat.

Most of all, he washed away his fears.

The Phoenix was not afraid.

Neither could Seokjin be.

Chapter End Notes

ya'll doubted me AND namjin...but here we both be....

lol i hope this chapter didn't disappoint. things are going to happen a lot more slowly now that we've gotten to the original premise of the summary lmao i lied about the new pov but i promise its coming NEXT chapter!!

if any of you are scratching your heads like "um? how was it so easy to get seokjin into the palace? why is no one suspicious?" then the answer to that is because the Bangtan rebels are in a rather desperate position (also kind of stupid lmao). they didn't really understand the severity of allowing ALL the former imperialist supporters/servants to die. imagine being given a palace and then there's no one around to run it who knows what they're doing...at this point, they just REALLY need bodies to carry out the simplest tasks, especially with The Big Coronation coming up...

kai is one of those static characters, supposed to represent the stereotypical alpha NiceGuy™ who thinks he is entitled to a prize for being a good person AKA doing one little thing. i hope his actions didn't come across as too out of the blue here because i tried to put the hints there in earlier chapters. ex: always giving seokjin unwanted gifts, not accepting rejection. (lol why am i worried when he was just an OC??? idk readers you can ignore this paragraph if you want, sorry for rambling.)

as always pls leave your thoughts in the comments below!! they feed my muse and really get me thinking lol

One-sided Love, One-sided Hate

Chapter Summary

Jeongguk finds himself trapped. Jimin finds himself torn.

Chapter Notes

oh would you look at that, jeongguk & jimin???

This chapter begins about a week or more before Seokjin arrives back at the palace, but ends the same day that he does. :) just to give you a reference for when all of this goes on.

TWs: suicidal thoughts, brief mention of prostitution, brief mention of noncon

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

There was a stain on the inside of Jeongguk's teacup. The omega's eyes never left the black dot. He wondered how it had gotten there or what it even was. If the tea hadn't been so hot, Jeongguk would've dipped his finger inside to try and rub the spot off. Instead he had to look at it, frown growing the longer he did.

Distantly, he heard his tutor rambling on about form and posture for the hundredth time. Jeongguk wondered if someone had gotten ink in the teacup somehow, or if it was just the stain of tea that had never been wiped up. For some reason, it irritated him. The blemish was right in front of him, and yet he couldn't get rid of it. If he even moved his hands from their precise placement on his lap, his tutor would take a ruler to them. Jeongguk's hands were already swollen and bruised from having fidgeted earlier.

Jeongguk gave Weiyoung a discreet glare as she waxed on and on about the proper role of an omega within the home. Her words made Jeongguk want to puke. She was, without a doubt, the worst tutor he had ever had.

Jeongguk's only other tutor had been a needling beta years ago who taught him his sums and how to read and write. What more did he need to know than that? Jeongguk asked his father as much, but the man had frowned and made the remark that because Jeongguk was of a higher class now, he should know how proper noble omegas behaved. Weiyoung, who had taught at a finishing school for omegas the last twenty years, had been hired to teach Jeongguk just that.

At first Jeongguk had thought it meant he would only have to sit through a few lessons and wear a dress or whatever now and then. He didn't think they would take his sword. Even now he almost reached for it. Jeongguk was used to the heavy ache of metal against his outer thigh, without which he felt empty.

"We can't have you scaring off suitors," his father said passively when Jeongguk had protested. "It's just until you secure a good match. Once you're mated you can do whatever you want."

Jeongguk wasn't appeased by his father's words. He knew enough about the world to know that the sort of alpha who wanted a weak, simpering omega would most certainly not allow their own mate to carry a sword. Unless Jeongguk married someone who looked the other way concerning his hobbies, he'd never pick up a sword again.

The omega pointed this out, but his father gave him a dark look. "There's no need for you to hold a sword anymore. We've won the war," Lord Jeon had sneered. "It's high time you stop pretending to be an alpha!"

Jeongguk shrunk in on himself at this, resisting the urge not to cry. For so long, he had forgotten the harsh words his father dealt out. Jeongguk's achievements on the battlefield had earned him nothing but praise, and his father's horrible nature had gradually faded away, becoming a bad memory.

Now it resurfaced, and Jeongguk was forced to confront the hopelessness of his position. *An omega*, he thought dully. *The second son, the spare. I can only achieve worth through the children I bear. So much for the glory I won during the Uprising. All of it belongs to my father and brother now.*

"Tilt your head down," Weiyoung chided, ruler pressing against the top of Jeongguk's head. "You can not *ever* look your spouse in the eye."

Jeongguk gritted his teeth, but lowered his head.

Weiyoung gave a hum of approval, and her ruler hovered above the tea set, tapping the table in front of Jeongguk. "An omega must drink tea with grace and poise," she huffed, motioning him to do just that.

Jeongguk's hands trembled as he brought them forward, and he saw Weiyoung frown at his uncertainty. He wanted nothing more than to grab the cup of hot tea and throw it at her face. Jeongguk clenched one hand around the cup and brought it up.

"No, no!" Weiyoung giggled. "Your grip is too strong. You have to be gentle now. You're an omega, not some brute!"

There it was.

You're an omega, Jeongguk. You're weak, Jeongguk. Don't play with swords, Jeongguk. Just sit there and look like a pretty, simpering fool and smile while you bat your eyes and show a little skin because that's all you are now is some-

Crack.

Jeongguk saw it before he felt it.

There was a dark brown splotch over his pastel hanbok suddenly, and several shards of glass were scattered over his lap, embedded even in the crinkles of his fingers. He didn't feel the heat of the wet tea that covered him, but the pain from the cuts came gradually, pricking the places where glass had struck. He distantly heard Weiyoung calling for a servant in her high-pitched, whistling voice.

Of course. As a noble omega, taking care of Jeongguk and his untidiness would be beneath her.

Jeongguk looked down at the mess he had made, and his eyes picked up on a rather large chunk of glass. The inside of it was completely white, with the one exception being that *stupid* black dot.

Jeongguk let out a low, drawn out hiss.

The omega sat there for a moment, a little numb and withdrawn, lost in his own head, until he felt a soft rag dabbing at his thighs.

“Young Master Jeon,” the servant said gently, familiar and near crooning. A fellow omega.
“Please lift your head. I have to check it for glass.”

Jeongguk frowned and tilted his head up. The servant that Weiyounghad called for was beautiful, his round face and fine features unmarred by freckles or scars of any kind. Most of the other servants were ugly, with faces like leather or wax. The omega picking glass from his fingertips was almost otherworldly in his beauty, like a faerie or nymph. His beauty screamed nobility, and yet here he was, cleaning up after Jeongguk.

“What’s your name?” Jeongguk blurted out, disregarding the gasp of disapproval from Weiyoungh. She would surely strike him for this mess already. What was one more whack?

The servant looked from Jeongguk to Weiyoungh, perhaps weighing the pros and cons of who to obey. If the servant was smart, he would ignore Jeongguk. Weiyoungh had more pull within the court at the moment. The smallest slight could cost him his job. Though he knew it was selfish, Jeongguk didn’t want to be ignored.

And yet he was. The servant closed his lips in a tight line, understanding the distance he needed to keep from Jeongguk, who was far above him in status. Jeongguk missed the dirt and grime of the training fields more than ever in that moment, when someone - alpha or beta, peasant or noble, it didn’t matter who - could give him a clap on the back after knocking someone down, maybe even pull him in for a hug or pat his head.

Jeongguk was untouchable now, a glass figure living in a cage for safekeeping. He wanted to bring his hand down on that large shard of glass, smashing the stain to pieces, but he felt Weiyoungh’s eyes on him. He swallowed his anger and unclenched his hands for the servant to wipe.

They were like paper cuts, barely even there, and the blood was wiped away soon enough. The servant remained however, dutiful and resolute as he bowed his head, plucking the glass from the rugs and setting it on a tray. Weiyoungh said something to the servant in a snide, imperious voice, about leaving Jeongguk’s hanbok the way it was and not treating his thighs as punishment.

Jeongguk only half-listened.

Upon seeing the lack of reaction from Jeongguk, Weiyoungh gave a disbelieving huff and threw her hands up in the air. Jeongguk believed this to be rather improper behavior, the sort of thing he would get told off for doing, and yet he held his tongue. It paid off, and not a second later, Weiyoungh had left the room, every step she took filled with the self-importance she must have felt.

“Jimin,” the servant said.

“What?” Jeongguk furrowed his brow. He was unsure of what the omega was talking about.
“Who-?”

“Jimin,” he repeated, pointing to himself. “That’s my name. You wanted to know it, didn’t you?”

Jeongguk blinked, taken aback. “She won’t like it if she knows you told me your name,” he said cautiously, perhaps a little suspiciously. “So why did you...”

Jimin paused for a moment, puffy lips pursing into a pout. Jeongguk couldn’t help but stare at

them. “Well, she has to know about it in the first place, doesn’t she?” he shrugged his shoulders, a small smile growing on his face. “And I, for one, don’t plan on telling her. Besides, from the looks of it, I think you could use a friend.”

Jeongguk didn’t really understand it, why this pretty omega, this stranger under the Bangtan Four’s employ, was so friendly. Yoongi would have told him to be more suspicious, but Jeongguk, who had been starved for the least bit of affection these last few days, threw caution to the wind. He returned the servant’s smile with one of his own and started to ask more questions.

“Where are you from?”

“The capital.”

“How old are you?”

“Twenty-three.”

“What’s your family name?”

“I don’t have one.”

At this, Jeongguk paused. The omega had the sort of face that only nobles did, yet he had no family name? Then did that mean...

“What about your parents?” he asked, trying to keep his voice casual, though he felt he already knew the answer.

“Your guess is as good as mine,” Jimin said, voice light as he pulled out a bottle from within his robes. “Don’t let your tutor see your thighs, alright? Keep them bandaged for a few weeks, even if they are healed. That way she won’t know I disobeyed her orders.”

He uncapped the bottle, and a putrid scent spilled forth, like that of rotting vegetables. Jeongguk made a dramatic gagging sound, to which Jimin only giggled. “Oh, stop! You should smell the slums if you think this is bad.”

Jeongguk stilled. “The slums?” he cleared his throat. “Were you around there a lot?”

He thought of Jimin’s pretty face, and what it meant for him to have lived anywhere near the capital’s slums. Jimin smiled, but it didn’t stretch as wide as it should. “No, not a lot. Just when I needed to be.”

The answer was cryptic, but Jeongguk left it alone. This friendship was still relatively new, after all.

“Well, what are you waiting for?” Jimin asked. He made a flapping motion with one hand. “Lift your skirt.”

Jeongguk felt his face heat up, cheeks surely a rosey red. “W-what?”

Jimin gave him a look. “How am I supposed to put this salve on your thighs if I can’t see them, huh?”

Of course that was what Jimin meant. They were both omegas, after all. Why did Jeongguk have to make it all weird? He wanted to smack himself in the head, but doing that would only make him look more awkward, so he didn’t. With the utmost embarrassment, Jeongguk slowly unfolded his

feet from beneath himself and lifted the skirts of his hanbok. Jimin let out a low whistle and Jeongguk's stomach twisted itself into knots. He felt suddenly very self-conscious, and then he felt anxious about why he even felt self-conscious in the first place.

"Wow, you're really fit," Jimin's eyes widened as he took in Jeongguk's legs. "I suppose that's what happens when you train all of the time, though."

Jeongguk's mouth was very dry, especially as Jimin scooted closer, dipping one of his small fingers into the bottle. "I haven't even trained this week," he somehow got out. Jeongguk's trip to the Prince Taehyung's hovel didn't count. There had been no action to see at all there, though Yoongi's rumors said otherwise.

"They don't let me anymore," Jeongguk admitted softly, sounding as put out as he felt regarding the matter.

Then he yelped.

Jimin's fingers were running along the slight ridges of one thigh, coating the bumps in a clear cream. It stung more than it tickled. "Is it because you killed the bastard prince?" Jimin asked offhandedly. "Were you not supposed to?"

Jeongguk winced. "No, that didn't..."

He stopped himself before he could give it away. Yoongi had been the one to suggest that rumor. He thought that if Prince Seokjin heard of his brother's demise, he would come right away.

So far, Yoongi had been wrong.

Jeongguk had just met Jimin, and though the other omega seemed kind and friendly and good, Jeongguk couldn't ruin Yoongi's plan. Maybe it just hadn't worked yet, and if word somehow got out through Jimin that Prince Taehyung wasn't really dead, it would never work at all.

"That didn't matter," Jeongguk saved himself. "It's because the fighting is all over and I'm an omega. If there's no war, then I can't fight. If I can't fight, then all I am is a womb."

Jimin's fingers dug into the bumps of his burns, and Jeongguk let out a longer cry, looking at Jimin with almost teary eyes.

Jimin retreated as if he were the one burned. He had a frown on his face, looking thoroughly disturbed. "Sorry," the servant said hastily. "It's just...I can't believe they're like that? I mean Lord Min still has his title, doesn't he? And he's an omega? So why are they treating you like this?"

Jeongguk shook his head, realizing how he had made it all sound now that it was too late. "No, no!" he waved his hands. "It's not the Bangtan Four! They wouldn't do that to me. It's...my father and my brother."

Jimin let out a low hum in understanding, nodding his head. "I see," he murmured. "How awful."

The other omega continued his work in silent, perhaps stewing over Jeongguk's words. He wrapped Jeongguk's burns in a clean white gauze, and as he lifted each leg to do so, Jeongguk repressed the shudders that threatened to run through him. The act seemed so intimate to him, and Jimin was so close, smelling like fresh flowers.

The servant gave his legs an affectionate pat once he was done, and he smiled. For some reason, the expression looked a little off. "You're lucky the burns weren't that bad," Jimin's voice sounded

almost strangled. “If the tea had been any hotter, I think it would’ve scarred.”

Jeongguk gave a nod, eyes never leaving Jimin’s face. He inspected the slope of his nose and the dots on each ear. Piercings? Usually only omegas able to afford the luxury of earrings would pierce their ears, so why did Jimin, a lower class citizen who grew up near the slums, have holes there?

Jimin cleared his throat. At first, Jeongguk thought it was because he’d been caught staring, but then Jimin pointed to his lap. “You can lower your skirt now, Young Master,” he said gently, teasingly. “I’m done.”

If Jeongguk had been pink before, he knew he was red now. He flipped his skirts back down in a hurry, shaking his head. “Sorry,” he muttered. “I didn’t even...”

Jimin winked. “I don’t mind. It’s probably not every day you get servants as pretty as me to wait on you, yes?”

Jeongguk wisely kept his mouth shut, to which Jimin laughed. The servant gave a little bow to Jeongguk and wiped his hands on the rag he’d used to soak up the tea, then he took the tray full of shattered glass in hand.

“If you want your hanbok cleaned, you should send it with a water maiden. Tell her to give it to Jimin. I can get a stain out of just about anything,” he said offhandedly.

Jeongguk didn’t particularly care about the hanbok, but if Jimin was offering to clean it, he’d have to bring it back sometime. “So I’ll see you again?” he asked, cursing himself for how eager he sounded.

Jimin smiled, though it didn’t reach his eyes. “Yes,” he agreed. “I suppose you will.”

Jeongguk tried not to let too much of his excitement show. He gave a diplomatic nod, lowering his face so Jimin hopefully didn’t see the childish beam on his face.

Finally, he thought gleefully. A new friend within the palace. Someone who might understand.

He couldn’t have been more wrong.

Jimin brought the tray of broken glass to the quarters he shared with four other omegas. His roommate—a young, squirrely thing—was the only one there, and with just one look, Jimin sent the boy scurrying out. The boy knew his place and what the expression on Jimin’s face meant. Once that annoyance was gone, it took only two strides for Jimin to approach the fire they used to heat their rooms. He summoned all of his frustration, his fury and his fear, and let it go in one fell swoop as he threw the shattered pieces into the crackling fire. It spat and sputtered as the glass tinkled, and Jimin’s felt his shoulders begin to shake.

He hadn’t done it. He couldn’t.

Jimin drew another bottle from his robes, nearly identical to the one he’d used on Lord Jeon’s son and threw it in with the glass as well. The flames hissed at him, liquid inside of the bottle bubbling.

The poison that Jimin hadn’t used.

It was pure chance that Jimin, of all the servants, was called into Jeon Jeongguk’s rooms, and it was the opportunity he’d been waiting for all week, ever since he’d heard the news whispered in the kitchens that had turned his world upside down. He’d wanted to meet Jeon Jeongguk, if only so he

could hit him or slit his throat in his sleep.

Jimin had sworn that he wouldn't let Jeongguk's crime go unpunished, that he would get vengeance, but when the time came to do just that, he'd faltered.

If Yerin could see him now, she'd be cackling.

She'd been right all along.

Up until the moment that Jeongguk had asked for his name, Jimin had been so sure, ready to get back at the rebels for taking away the one good thing he had. Then Jeongguk looked up at him, eyes wide and bright. Jimin actually thought about killing the boy in front of him, the dirty act of it all, and his hands shook. He imagined Jeongguk's blood staining them for the rest of his life, how the thought alone would be enough to drive him mad, and he realized.

These weren't hands that could kill.

He couldn't kill anybody, even the boy who'd taken away the love of his life.

Jimin wasn't dangerous or threatening, most certainly not the type of cutthroat that survived in the palace. He should've heeded her warnings. Jimin was soft, too soft, and he couldn't do what needed to be done.

It was because Jeongguk had been so...human. He was almost painfully shy and awkward, like a newborn foal standing on shaking legs for the first time. Jeongguk was a flower near fully bloomed, but Jimin recognized him as one that thrived on a battlefield, not at court. Here, he would wilt, petals withering amongst all the pretty caged birds and glass dolls.

When Jimin looked at the other omega, he had seen an eighteen-year-old boy. Not a murderer.

The teasing words had spilled so easily from his lips, and Jimin blamed that on the training he'd received from Yerin. When in doubt, flirt. When nervous, flirt. When overcome by grief when faced with your loved one's killer, flirt.

Even now, he looked back on how easily he'd faked his interest and sank to his knees, bile rising. Taehyung deserved better than Jimin, better than a whore. It was just as Yerin said. Dry sobs began to wrack his body. Tears refused to fall; Jimin had cried them all out these last few days.

Taehyung, he thought. *Taehyung, I'm sorry. I couldn't do it. I couldn't avenge you.*

Though he knew that Taehyung would not blame him, that his alpha would forgive him no matter what, Jimin hated himself for it. He'd never felt more useless than he did now. He shuffled over to his cot and fiddled with the small wooden case he kept under there, flipping it open and carefully examining the contents of the case.

Jimin sniffled.

He hadn't worn it before, if only because he didn't want to get Taehyung's hopes up, and after they were separated it hadn't felt fair of him to wear it. But now Taehyung was dead, and the only thing Jimin had left of him was the emerald pendant he'd been given.

He traced his fingers over it carefully, going over the grooves and curves, and lamented his foolishness. *I'd take it all back if I could. I wouldn't listen to Yerin and I'd proudly wear his ring on my finger. Even if that meant I would've died by his side.*

When Jimin had first heard the news he had been bedridden, unable to even move as he cried and sobbed until his eyes and chest burned. He'd covered his grief with a horrible lie to the other servants about having the flu, but he got up the next day. Because Taehyung would want him to. Jimin couldn't waste away when he had to live on, honoring Taehyung's memory.

He was nothing more than a ghost now, floating through life with a sick and detached interest. The makeup hid the greyness of his face and the bags under his eyes, but Jimin wondered how long it would last until he was blown away, nothing more than dust in the wind.

He undid the clasp on the necklace, and slowly, with trembling hands, wrapped it around his neck. It clicked into place. The necklace was low enough to hide under the standard uniform that was given to servants, and even if it slipped out, Jimin knew it wouldn't garner too much attention. The rules here were so lax lately that other servants had gotten away with wearing engagement collars and pretty bracelets over their uniform.

Jimin glanced over to the small, cracked mirror he and his roommates used, and he admired the contrast of the green against his honey skin.

"It matches your eyes," Taehyung had said, looking over Jimin's shoulder at the reflection of the two of them in the mirror. His dark eyes had twinkled as he held the necklace up to Jimin's throat, placing a soft kiss to the side of his neck. Jimin remembered flushing and looking away, unable to meet the alpha's eyes as his stomach twisted itself into knots, curdling with a nervous desire so thick he thought he'd throw up.

Now Jimin slowly ran his fingers against his neck, as if feeling the phantom kiss that Taehyung had placed there so long ago. His chest felt so tight, and if he thought too long and hard on it, he knew he could somehow summon tears again.

But he wouldn't.

Instead, Jimin swallowed the lump in his throat and took a deep breath. He could not kill Jeon Jeongguk - fine. He would just do whatever he could to avoid the boy.

Fate was laughing at him. Just from his small encounter with Weiyong, Jimin had been judged as loyal, someone with blind eyes and ears full of cotton, the perfect servant to wait on Jeongguk personally from now on. Needless to say, Jimin had no say in the matter. He could either report to Jeongguk's quarters when needed or 'say goodbye to his pretty neck', as Weiyong had put it.

Jeongguk opened up all too easily, basking in Jimin's presence. Jimin had to wonder if it was because he was lonely as of late. As far as he knew, only the tutor Weiyong and a few servants were allowed to visit him. None of the other Bangtan Four had paid Jeongguk any mind once he was sequestered away in the Jeon wing of the palace.

"They're all busy with rebuilding and stuff," Jeongguk explained, shrugging his shoulders as if it didn't bother him, though clearly it did.

"Lord Min still makes time for his general, though, doesn't he? So why can't he come visit you?" Jimin pried, setting out Jeongguk's clothes for the day. He'd chosen something bold and masculine, something he knew Jeongguk would like but Weiyong would not.

Jeongguk flushed. "That's different!" he insisted. "Yoongi and Hobi are going to be mates! Of course they'd see each other a lot. I'm just...nobody."

"But you're one of the Bangtan Four?" Jimin said, cocking his head to the side. He held a dazzling

chain up to Jeongguk's chest, then clucked his tongue and set it back down. That wouldn't work.

The other omega frowned, silent for a moment. "It's no big deal. I'll see Yoongi soon anyways! My father says he has something he wants to discuss with me," he finally admitted.

Jimin's interest was piqued. "Oh?" he kept his voice casual, lightly prodding.

It paid off.

Jeongguk nodded and elaborated. "It's about the line of succession. Who would take over if something happened to our Kim candidate."

"Well, there's no one else anymore, is there?" Jimin asked, perhaps a little too sharply. His love was dead and Prince Seokjin was missing. The Bangtan Four had pulled one long lost Kim from the woodwork, one whose lineage was already dubious at best. Another would be unbelievable.

Something in Jeongguk's face closed off, as if he were just now aware of what he'd said. "Ah," he began quietly. "Yes. That's why Yoongi is going to discuss it with me."

Jimin picked up a comb from the dresser and began to run it through the tangles of Jeongguk's hair. The other omega let out a keening sound at the action, tilting his head back as he closed his eyes in bliss.

"Perhaps you should just mate your candidate off already. If the palace finally establishes a harem and the future king gets to work, you won't have to worry about the line of succession anymore, will you?" Jimin suggested. Honestly, it sounded like the best solution to their little problem, but one that Jeongguk disagreed with.

"He's not like that," Jeongguk said, wrinkling his nose. "He doesn't want that. It's - ow!"

"Sorry," Jimin apologized hastily for pulling the comb through Jeongguk's hair a little too roughly. "But shouldn't your new king know? Sometimes we have to do things we don't want to."

He thought of dance lessons and the black ink tattooed on his back, hours spent in practice until his joints ached, until the burn from his back faded away to the searing pain of a broken wrist. They'd painted his face so very pretty for that performance, and it was only afterwards that he learned the First Night would follow. The patron with the highest bid had seen his wrist crack, noticed how Jimin had nursed it halfway through his dance, and then later, when he'd had Jimin, he'd grabbed his wrist and squeezed so hard the omega blacked out.

Jimin had not danced for a year after. Then he met Taehyung. For an alpha, he was a fluttering thing, whimsical and earnest. Jimin was besotted almost immediately, and he began to dream of escaping Madam Yerin's house, of leaving his chains behind for something good, something true.

And he would have, if Madam Yerin had not threatened him to end things.

Now he was here, serving the very boy who'd killed Taehyung, equipped only with wooden smiles and dead eyes. Jimin knew that to kill himself was to dishonor Taehyung's memory; it was the only thing that kept him going.

"What did you do before this, Jimin? You weren't always a servant, were you?" Jeongguk asked. Perhaps he could tell Jimin had lost himself to a memory.

Jimin ran a hand through Jeongguk's hair gently, giving an appreciative hum as he stared off into space. He wished he could just wrap his hands around Jeongguk's throat and be done with it, but

no - it was not so easy.

His life never had been.

“Not a servant,” Jimin murmured. “I was always a slave.”

He ignored Jeongguk’s pitying look, barely gave him a second glance as the other omega grabbed him by the wrist, thumb moving in circles over the scar there. “I’m sorry, Jimin,” Jeongguk said quietly. “I overstepped.”

You did a lot more than that, Jimin thought. But he buried the hatred, the anger, and set to work on fixing Jeongguk’s hair.

Though before Weiyoung had gotten on his nerves, now she was unbearable. Each day she berated Jeongguk’s choice of dress and criticized the lack of powder on his face. “You don’t even look like a noble omega anymore! Are you doing this on purpose?”

Jeongguk fought the urge to stick out his tongue. Jimin had told him he’d looked good, and that was enough for him. He didn’t really care what Weiyoung had to say on the matter, even if it meant she’d hit him with her stupid ruler again.

“You shouldn’t antagonize her so much,” Jimin insisted. He was cleaning the new welts on Jeongguk’s forearms. “I know for a fact that you don’t mind those dresses half as much as you pretend to.”

“It’s the principle of it!” Jeongguk argued, feeling pleased at his growing vocabulary. He hated Weiyoung’s lessons and how stuffy they were, but the more fancy words he learned, the smarter he felt.

“Does your father know that she hits you?” Jimin asked.

Jeongguk paused. “I don’t know.”

The more honest answer was that it was very likely. To Jeongguk, at least, his father knew everything and everyone. Nothing escaped his notice.

Jimin frowned at the response. “I would think he’d be displeased, what with how eager he is to find you a mate.”

Jeongguk shifted around. Whenever they talked about such a thing, he became nervous, only because it was Jimin he was confiding in. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“A scarred omega is damaged goods. Don’t you know this?”

“And?” Jeongguk said, not seeing what all of the fuss was about.

“And damaged goods are harder to sell,” Jimin finished for him, eyes narrowed into slits. “So I don’t see why your father is so willing to damage you.”

“I have a title,” Jeongguk said confidently. “Any alpha won’t care about how my body looks when I have the Jeon family name and fortune behind me.”

It wasn’t just the welts that Weiyoung gave him on a daily basis. Jeongguk had received scars from his battles, too, but he didn’t want to bring attention to them. Jeongguk was afraid Jimin would

judge him for that, would suddenly think him ugly and wrong.

But Jimin's face fell all the same, and with it, Jeongguk's stomach plummeted. He'd said the wrong thing, perhaps been too confident, and wanted to take it back immediately. Yoongi had told him his pride could be off-putting at times; most likely that was how Jimin felt, someone who'd spent the majority of his life as a slave having to listen to Jeongguk boast about his privilege.

Except Jimin did not cry or glare at Jeongguk, the boy born with a silver spoon in his mouth. Instead he just stared at him for a moment, his green eyes looking older, wiser.

"Trust me, Young Master," Jimin said, voice sounding far off. "They will always care."

Jeongguk had known Jimin only a few days, but already he was beginning to notice the moments where he slipped, falling far away as a wave of melancholy washed over him. Jimin would get this haunted look on his face, and he'd speak almost in riddles. Sometimes he was just sad. Other times he looked like he might kill Jeongguk.

The lapses in personality had been cause for concern. Jeongguk wasn't a complete idiot, so he asked another servant to fetch him Jimin's file, hoping it could offer a clue into his backstory. Once Jungkok had read that, he'd known all he needed to know.

Jimin had lived his entire life in the capital, and when he was freed from slavery, it was through an anonymous patron, though they were certainly someone within the former imperialist court. Jimin owed his freedom to an imperialist and was by all accounts most likely one himself, one of the few who spat on the Bangtan rebel flags, lit incense for the lost princes, and prayed for the former Kim dynasty's rise from the ashes.

It was no wonder he didn't like Jeongguk as much as he pretended to.

And yet in this lonely wing of the palace, he was all Jeongguk had at the moment. He was beautiful and jaded, so close yet so untouchable. Jeongguk wanted him as an ally, his own person he could trust within this glittering court of fake smiles and hidden daggers.

That was what he told himself as he changed the topic and started to regale Jimin with a tale of how Weiyoung had embarrassed herself yesterday, paying close attention to how the elder's eyes lit up in mirth. He told himself that's all it was, even as his stomach turned with something thick and hot, and he felt a hopeful spark grow, voice inside screaming, *Yes, yes, he'll like us soon. Just wait and see!*

Jimin seemed to be a favorite among the servants, a worthy confidant who was familiar with not just the former imperialist court, but one who was becoming more comfortable with the emerging Bangtan court as well. It made sense for Jeongguk to want to turn him towards his side. A partnership or even a friendship. That's all it was.

It was most certainly not because he wanted Jimin himself.

He dismissed Jimin once Yoongi arrived, knowing it was to be a private talk, one meant for Bangtan Four ears only.

Yoongi raised an eyebrow as the door closed behind Jimin, tucking his hands within the sleeves of his dark hanbok. "You know his name," he remarked.

Jeongguk flushed, feeling agitated. "It's best to know my servants' names. I have to establish a bond of trust with them."

The corner of Yoongi's lips tugged upwards into a smirk. "Really? I thought it was bad luck in your father's household to show familiarity with servants. Something about being above them in all regards?"

Jeongguk scowled. "Well, my father's not here," he said shortly, hoping to leave it at that. "I suppose you would know that, if you actually took the time to visit me."

Though Yoongi's absence hadn't hurt at first, Jeongguk felt it cut deep now. It was almost as if he and Namjoon - even Hobi, known for his attentiveness - had thrown him to the wolves so to speak. The other three were making changes to the country's infrastructure, doing important things to make it a better place. Meanwhile Jeongguk was locked away and lectured on how to pour tea or paint his face.

Yoongi softened considerably and took a seat beside him, leaning in close, as if to draw Jeongguk in for a hug, but the younger only shot him a look. "You didn't even ask for my permission to sit, hyung," Jeongguk mocked. "Weiyong would have your hide if she saw that."

The Min heir looked like he'd swallowed something particularly unpleasant at the mention of his tutor. "Yes. Well, you'd be surprised at how little I care about what your father's tutor thinks."

"You've known then, what my father's ordered?" Jeongguk asked, mouth suddenly dry. He'd hoped that they'd been too busy to take notice, because surely - surely if they'd known, they would try and stop it?

But Yoongi only slowly nodded his head, confirming what Jeongguk had feared most. "We had an idea. Your father told us you were undergoing training. A transformation of sorts. He didn't let one of us see you until now. Even then it had to be me. He worried it would make your virtue questionable if you had an unmated alpha calling on you. It seems your father didn't need to worry about the alphas after all."

Yoongi sent a meaningful look at the door that Jimin had just exited, perhaps trying to lighten the mood, but it just prodded at something raw and wounded in Jeongguk. He was angry, and he had a right to be. Why couldn't Yoongi, of all people, understand that?

"They took away my sword," Jeongguk said, pulling at the frustration which had settled inside him this last week, a volcano ready to go off. "They won't let me train anymore, and I have to sit in here every day and practice acting like some sort of simpering fool."

"The situation is not ideal," Yoongi interrupted, looking harried. "I know that. Namjoon knows that. Hobi knows that. Your father is a little more *solid* than we'd thought."

"So you're just letting him do whatever he wants. Is it because he has money?"

"He has supporters," Yoongi stressed. "People backing him from all corners of this country. Gods, he even has a leash on some of the imperialists. We can't afford to lose him, not at such a crucial time like this."

Jeongguk's anger began to simmer, fizzling out then, because he knew how terrifying his own father could be. Jeongguk himself had done nothing to go against him; why should he blame his friends for doing the same?

Yoongi ran a hand through his hair in frustration, sighing. "Trust me, Jeongguk," he said. "I've done what I can. If I didn't have Hoseok as my impulse control, I would've been the first to drag

you out of here.”

Jeongguk uncurled his fists slowly and let out a deep, shaky breathe. He leaned over, resting his head on Yoongi’s shoulder. The display of affection seemed to surprise the Min heir, who froze for a moment before he brought his arm up, wrapping it around Jeongguk.

“I understand,” Jeongguk said finally. “It just irritates me, and I can’t let it out to anyone else, so it builds.”

“Not even your servant?”

This time it was not teasing, but serious. Maybe Yoongi wondered how deeply Jeongguk confided in Jimin. Despite Yoong’s worries, there was no way Jeongguk could whine too heavily in Jimin’s presence.

If he constantly complained to Jimin about how terrible his life was, he had a suspicion the servant would refuse to come back to his quarters, even if it meant forfeiting his life. Jeongguk was still in the process of getting Jimin to begrudgingly like him.

“Not even my servant,” Jeongguk admitted.

They simply sat there for a few moments more, both of them soaking up the rare affection.

“What did you have to tell me in the first place? About the princes?” Jeongguk at last broke the silence, raising his head so he could look at Yoongi’s face.

The Min heir nodded his head, eyes brightening. “It’s good news. Very good news. I suppose I should’ve just opened with that and then we wouldn’t have had all this angst, yes?”

Jeongguk scowled and gave Yoongi a half-hearted shove. He only smirked.

“You won’t have to be locked up here anymore. At least for a few months.”

“What? Why?”

“I’ve gotten your father to agree on sending you out on a mission. It was Namjoon’s idea to send you out in the first place. I only approved so we could get you away from here while things settle down.”

Jeongguk shuffled around eagerly, nose twitching. “Where am I going?”

Yoongi’s smile faded only a little. “Well, there’s no exact destination,” he said delicately. “Think of it as more of an adventure.”

Jeongguk waited for him to go on, and when he did, it seemed to be about something unrelated.

“You know I was the one who insisted we run with the rumor you’d killed Taehyung. I thought it would draw Seokjin here, towards the palace, if only so he’d come for you, his brother’s killer.”

“But he didn’t,” Jeongguk murmured. “Prince Seokjin didn’t come.”

“So I’m suggesting something else. You go and search for Taehyung again, but this time you don’t stop until you find him. Find Taehyung, and you’ll find Seokjin. I can promise you that.”

Jeongguk frowned. “But I thought you said they were separated, that Seokjin had gone with

someone else-”

“I was wrong,” Yoongi admitted. “I thought he was with Mun Kai, but Namjoon just informed me that they found Mun Kai this morning. Dead. Namjoon said he’d been found outside a tavern, most likely the result of some drunk alpha posturing.”

“And Seokjin wasn’t with him?”

Yoongi sighed. “I didn’t tell Namjoon I thought Seokjin would be with Mun Kai, so he didn’t know to look for the prince in the first place. My soldiers haven’t reported anything back to me yet either, but we can rule out that Seokjin was there.”

“Why? Maybe he’s hiding on his own now that Mun Kai is dead, and we just haven’t found him yet.”

The Min heir shook his head. “No, there’s no way. If Seokjin would not come for Taehyung’s killer, then he must’ve known Taehyung was alive. The only way he can know that without a doubt is if he has seen his brother, if he’s with him right now. I knew Seokjin was with an alpha, but I hadn’t thought that alpha would be his brother.”

Jeongguk was still a little lost. He said as much, furrowing his brow in confusion. Yoongi took in a deep breathe and looked around, narrowing his eyes. The Min heir crooked a finger, a gesture for Jeongguk to lean in close, which he did.

“I’m going to tell you something important about Prince Seokjin, Jeongguk, something you can’t tell anybody else. Not Namjoon or Hoseok, and most certainly not your father. This is between us - from one omega to another.”

Jeongguk wasn’t sure he wanted to know. He started to draw back, but the protests on his tongue died as Yoongi clapped a hand on his shoulder, holding him in place. The older omega leaned in, lips barely touching Jeongguk’s ear, and confided in him the secret of Prince Seokjin.

Jeon Jeongguk was leaving tomorrow morning. Such short notice meant he would only be traveling with a small band of soldier to accompany him. There was no time for pomp or circumstance of any sorts. It wasn’t Jeongguk himself Jimin heard this news from later that night, but a fellow servant instead.

“I heard he’s being sent off to marry a lord,” one water maiden insisted. “He’s a salt merchant who bought his title.”

Another swatted her with a damp towel. “No, no! He’s being sent off to Qing as a gift! The Four Houses have got to make amends now that they killed off the old royal family.”

Some servants even had the gall to theorize that Jeongguk was running away, that he couldn’t take his father’s rules anymore so he was making off while he could during Lord Jeon’s absence. Jimin wondered how stupid someone had to be to believe something like that. If Jeongguk was trying to run away, the servants would be the last to know about it.

When Jimin was serving Jeongguk his supper, he asked him about where he was going, and the boy froze up. “I just...it’s a trip of sorts? I don’t really know much about it. I’m learning as I go along.”

Jimin raised an eyebrow. “Interesting,” he murmured, though he didn’t really care.

Jimin would have left it at that, too, but Jeongguk kept fidgeting with his plate, nervous for some reason. He ended up knocking some of his dinner utensils to the floor.

“Sorry, sorry!” Jeongguk apologized, huffing.

Jimin bent to pick it up and took the opportunity to roll his eyes where Jeongguk could not see.

“Honest, I didn’t mean to! I don’t know why I’m like this around...” Jeongguk trailed off.

“It’s fine,” Jimin insisted, raising his head as he set the utensils back on the table. He happened to look over at Jeongguk, wondering what the cause for his silence was. Once Jimin realized what it was, he went cold all over.

The younger omega was staring at his neck, mouth dropped open and eyes dim. “A collar?” he said weakly, pitifully. “Why didn’t you tell me you were engaged?”

Jimin’s hand flew to his throat, where his emerald pendant had peaked out as he’d lowered his neck. “You never asked,” he said, feeling himself start to tremble, “and it was better that you didn’t.”

Jeongguk shifted in his seat. “What do you mean?”

He looked so heartbroken and sad, and Jimin wanted nothing more than to grab him by the shoulders and shake him until he woke up, because Jeon Jeongguk had nothing to be sad about.

“He was an imperialist. He was a good man, a kind man, and you had him killed,” Jimin couldn’t keep the whine from his voice. He felt something clawing at his insides, begging to be let free, but he shoved it back down.

Jeongguk looked as if Jimin had just punched him in the stomach, face drained of all its color as he opened and closed his mouth like a fish. “I never meant...I don’t remember...”

Jimin just shook his head, glaring at Jeongguk as he backed away. There was nothing Jeongguk could say, no apology or such to make up for what he had done. Unless he could bring Taehyung back from the dead, Jimin didn’t want to hear it.

“What was his name?” Jeongguk asked, frantic. “Please, tell me who it was!”

Jimin’s eyes stung, but he wouldn’t give Jeon Jeongguk the satisfaction of seeing him cry. “Even if I told you, would you remember? I’m sure you killed thousands on that battlefield, faceless men whose names you didn’t even know. What’s one more to the list?”

“Jimin,” Jeongguk moved forward.

In that moment, Jimin forgot himself. He slapped Jeongguk’s hand away without a second thought. “Don’t you dare presume to touch me with those filthy hands! Don’t you *dare*!”

Jeongguk shrunk in on himself, looking so much like a child, but Jimin refused to feel guilty. It was his fault that Taehyung was dead. What right did he have to cry?

“I knew you didn’t like me,” Jeongguk admitted, voice trembling. “But I didn’t know you hated me this much.”

“From the moment I realized who you were and what you’d done, I hated you.”

Jeongguk shook his head helplessly. “Then why did you act so nice to me? What was the point?”

Jimin couldn't help it. He let out a breathless sort of laugh, eyes turning mean and spiteful. “Survival,” he spat. “I acted like your friend only so I wouldn't be sent to the chopping block. It was nothing more than that.”

He was lying. Jimin was lying, only because he knew how much it must hurt, and if he couldn't physically lash out at Jeongguk, then surely he could do so with his words. He watched Jeongguk retreat further into himself and stand from the table, making his way to the door. Jimin felt a heavy feeling fill his chest, a sort of sick, perverted joy at the other's suffering. It was the least Jeongguk deserved.

But then Jeongguk raised his head and straightened his shoulders, as if he was completely unbothered, and fixed Jimin with a wretched smile of his own.

“They always begged before I cut their throats,” Jeongguk taunted. “I'm sure your lover was the same.”

Jimin saw red. It was just like when he had smacked away Jeongguk's hand. His body moved before he could stop it, and he grabbed the teapot that sat on the table, throwing it forward at Jeongguk just as the omega left the room. The teapot shattered against the door instead, and the servant let out a cry, falling to his knees along with the hundreds of glass pieces.

Jimin brought a hand to his chest, wondering if the angry, weeping hole in his heart would ever go away.

Never, the broken teapot seemed to say. *You will never piece yourself back together from this.*

Chapter End Notes

{Taehyung wasn't the imperialist noble who bought Jimin's freedom}

what little jikook there was ended before it could even begin... :(

The first two omegas (jin and yoongi) shown were so vicious, I'm nervous how the second two will be received. I had lots of people comment that they liked how atypical Jin and Yoongi were as omegas, but Jeongguk and Jimin fit closer to the mold. I wanted to showcase the different strengths an omega can have with each character.

Jimin is the omega with the strongest moral compass in this story at the moment, and I really hope that people don't see Jimin incapable of killing Jeongguk as him acting weak or stupid. It was never my intention to make him weak. From my own personal experience, not lashing out at the person responsible is the strongest thing to do (oh god welcome to my TED talk lmao). That was what I wanted to show here. :>

Also Jeongguk!! He's physically the strongest omega in the story, but he's a little dense when it comes to knowing the ways of the world (insert shifty eyes emoji here). This is in part due to his youth and lack of experience with people. He was born in destitution after his father had severed ties with the king and spent most of his time fighting rather than making friends.

This chapter didn't focus on Seokjin or Namjoon, but it was important for moving The Plot™ along lol (also i must sow the seeds for my companion fics don't @ me)

BEAR WITH ME NAMJIN WILL RISE AGAIN SOON :)))

follow me on [twitter](#) for fic updates and more!! :)

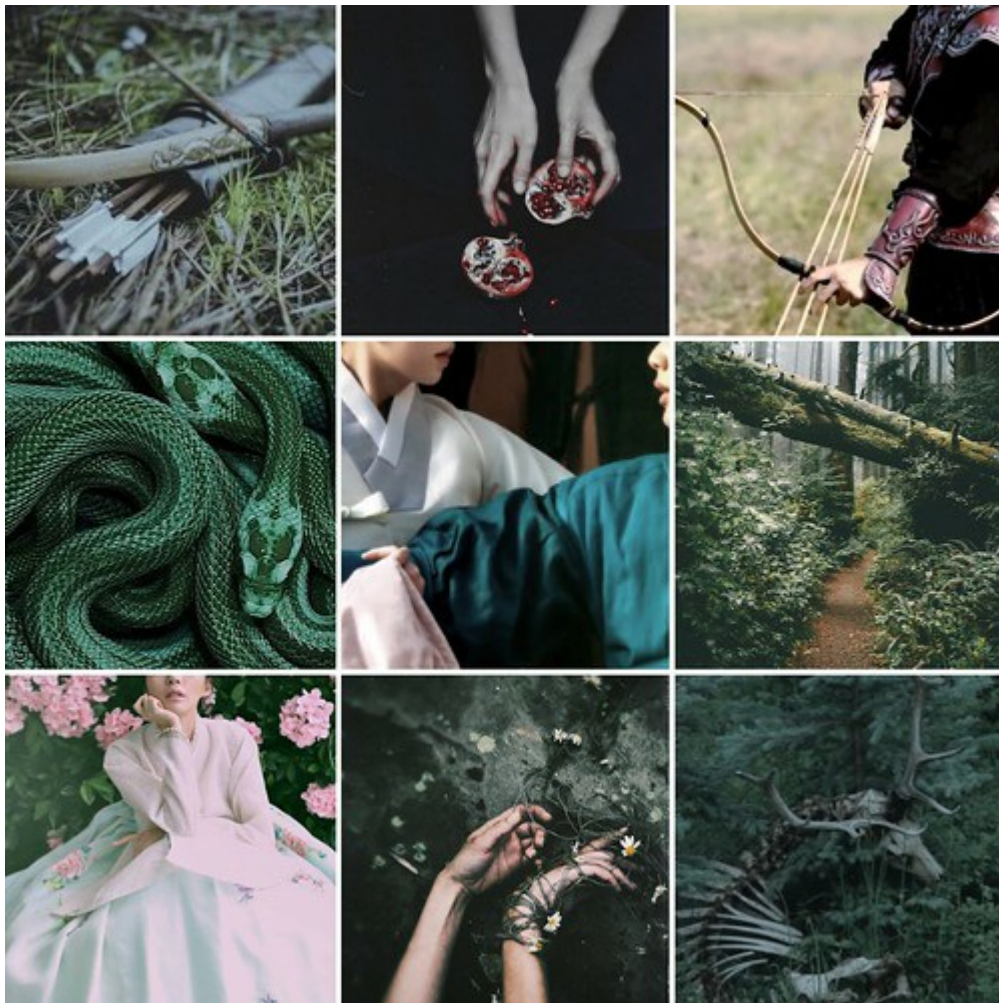
Pomegranates

Chapter Summary

*****NOT A NEW CHAPTER*** I REPEAT, NOT A NEW CHAPTER*****

i am incorporating "pomegranates & wine" into the main storyline!!! this is the first chapter of p&w, but rewritten in the past tense. if you have read this, then disregard this update!! if not, then pls enjoy as i reveal what happened to taehyung and jeongguk!! if you want to see why this is even happening, please read end notes!! ok thank you!! <3

Chapter Notes



TW: PLANNED noncon/rape and murder, which DO NOT happen, but are mentioned and talked about!!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Yoongi was the one who saw Jeongguk off.

The elder omega's eyes grew soft as he gazed at him. He took the younger's wrist, brushing it against the glands on his neck. The gesture was archaic, something almost too intimate that no one bothered with anymore - even then, it was usually reserved for families and mates. Jeongguk's heart warmed at the action.

"You must be careful now," Yoongi murmured. "I don't want you to come back missing any fingers or toes, alright?"

Jeongguk laughed. "You don't have to worry about me, hyung! I'll be fine. This so-called prince won't stand a chance against me!"

Yoongi frowned and shook his head. "Do you know why the old king favored Prince Taehyung, a bastard born of a farmer's daughter over Prince Seokjin, his legitimate son of noble blood?"

"It's because he's an alpha, that's why," Jeongguk said, rolling his eyes. Though it was so obvious, that didn't make it any less ridiculous. "Prince Seokjin is only a beta. Of course he'd prefer the alpha son."

There were ears listening in, guards and soldiers surrounding all sides, and Jeongguk knew how to be discreet. He did not dare say the truth that Yoongi had only recently confided in him: that the Crown Prince was in fact an omega, not the beta he so carefully pretended to be.

Yoongi's frown deepened, and he lowered his voice. "Prince Taehyung was an alpha, yes, but his blood lust, short temper, and strength - he didn't get that from being an alpha. He inherited it from his father, the same man who set fire to his own flesh and blood."

A shiver ran down Jeongguk's back. He thought of Namjoon, who wore gloves and long sleeves to cover the bumpy, scalded flesh of his hands and wrists. Namjoon, who woke up in the middle of the night, sweating and screaming as he remembered the sight of his parents and cousins burning alive, the king's laugh haunting him still.

"So what?" Jeongguk huffed, feigning indifference when all he felt was the creeping sensation of fear. Because if Taehyung was as mad as his father, then perhaps he should be a little frightened. "I'm one of our best fighters. I can't possibly lose to the likes of him."

"So I want you to promise you'll be careful," Yoongi stressed, clicking his tongue. "If there were anyone else I could trust to do this, if I didn't know how much you needed to get out of the palace, I would have never sent you."

Jeongguk pretended not to feel hurt at that, because it sounded as though Yoongi had admitted Jeongguk was nothing more than a last resort. The hurt must have shown on his face, however, because Yoongi waved his hands soon after, attempting to clear the misunderstanding.

"It's not that I think you're incapable of handling him," the other omega huffed, a little frustrated as he searched for the right words to say. "I just worry. I don't want you getting hurt. Taehyung was...unpredictable."

Jeongguk cocked his head to the side, curious. "Did you know him well? Before he was exiled, that is."

"Taehyung befriended many people within these palace walls, but I was not one of them," Yoongi admitted, and his voice turned wistful. "I was closer to Seokjin than anyone else."

The younger omega fidgeted, chiding himself for asking about Yoongi's time in the palace prior to the Uprising. Yoongi had been a hostage under the same family that conspired to kill his father, and Jeongguk was amazed he didn't go mad under such circumstances.

"I'll try to be more careful, hyung," Jeongguk promised dutifully. "Just so you don't go bald."

Yoongi scowled, running a hand through his hair. "Watch yourself, brat. I'll have you know I can send a curse your way any time I want!"

Jeongguk just laughed. "Hobi-hyung won't let you. He'll whine until you undo whatever magic you try."

The Min lord rolled his eyes, arms crossed over his chest, but cannot deny it. Hoseok remained Yoongi's soft spot; the omega would move mountains and part clouds just to see his lover smile. Jeongguk couldn't help but think that it must be nice, to have someone care that much for you and to care for them in return. A small part of him - an ugly, weak part - oozed envy at the seemingly perfect relationship between Yoongi and Hoseok, two childhood friends set to get married in less than a year's time.

Jeongguk, though he was eighteen years old, had never had a suitor of any sort. His family was on the run for years after his father's dismissal from court, and even once Jeongguk had fully presented, his father kept him busy with training or fighting. Now that their rebellion had been successful, Jeongguk still didn't think he'd ever be courted. Any match would be arranged by his father, who was as eager as ever to trade off his youngest son in exchange for more gold or influence.

There would be no great love affair for Jeongguk, no first love or suitor. All that awaited him were the heavy chains of duty, binding him to a life of loneliness.

Yoongi pinched one of Jeongguk's cheeks. "Oi, why the long face? Shouldn't you be happy you're getting out of here? You've been stuck inside the palace long enough."

"It's nothing. I just...guess I'm a bit nervous," Jeongguk lied. He hoped Yoongi won't pry too much. The younger omega wasn't exactly in the mood to talk about alphas and feelings or anything like that. He had a mission to do, princes to find. He couldn't afford to get lazy or emotional.

Yoongi nodded, either understanding that now was not the time or place or just not picking up on Jeongguk's true feelings. "I can offer you some advice," he murmured. "I didn't mention it at the briefing because it's more of a personal matter, but..."

"What was it?" Jeongguk asked.

"Seokjin once complained that his brother spent far too much time in gisaeng houses. Taehyung would waste good coin simply on a pretty lady's words, or even buy silk dresses and fancy jewels for the gisaeng he fancied that week."

"He's a stereotypical rich alpha then," Jeongguk huffed. "Great. Now I know for sure this'll be fun."

"I'm trying to let you know that you could have the advantage here, Jeongguk. Right from the get-go," Yoongi sighed, rolling his eyes when Jeongguk remained blank-faced.

"Taehyung has a weakness for beautiful things. And Jeongguk? You're the sort of pretty thing he'd die for."

Jeongguk left with seven of his father's men falling in behind him, his sword returned and resting heavy on his hip, and Yoongi's final words - were they more like a warning? - ringing in his ears.

Jeongguk did not like the men his father sent him off with. They had dark, mean eyes that looked at him strangely, and their faces were always twisted into frowns. Often they spoke in hushed tones amongst themselves, gazes never leaving him, and whenever he gave them orders, they took a few moments before they obeyed, grumbling all the while.

They were not particularly skilled either, Jeongguk found. He practiced with each of them and managed to knock every man off of his feet.

One man sputtered, face red with outrage as he stood. "You little-" he snarled, hands clenched into fists as he drew one back.

"What was that?" Jeongguk asked, tone clipped. He did not have time for insubordination, for proud alphas who could not handle taking orders from an omega, much less being beaten by one.

Jeongguk's tone had stopped the alpha in his tracks, but he spat at the ground as he pushed passed, hands still clenched. The other six looked to the retreating alpha, then back to Jeongguk, something ugly in their eyes as they murmured to each other.

Jeongguk sheathed his sword and slept with one eye open that night.

They'd been searching for at least two weeks, with little luck. There were no signs of Prince Taehyung anywhere. Jeongguk visited one gwaesaeng house after another, questioning the madams, workers, and even the patrons. No one had seen hide nor hair of the bastard prince since his exile from the palace. He even went to Taehyung's old village, the small farm he was born and raised on, but the results were the same. Jeongguk began to suspect that someone had to know something; they were only afraid to betray the blood of the Phoenix. Considering the alpha's infamous temper, Taehyung was surprisingly well-liked by everyone they spoke to. Anyone who admitted to knowing him held the bastard prince in high regard. They spoke of his kindness and humility, of how charitable he was whenever he came around.

These words went against Jeongguk's picture of Prince Taehyung.

Jeongguk also could not help but think that the rumors the Bangtan forces had spread of the prince's demise contributed to the lack of information about him. If the common people believed their bastard prince to be dead, slain by Jeongguk himself, then they wouldn't be as wary as they should of passing strangers, wouldn't think twice if they saw an alpha that resembled their dead prince.

When it had been another week with no leads, the men became antsy. They didn't take to orders as well as they should have, meeting Jeongguk's eyes so often that it was a deliberate act of defiance. Jeongguk punished one of the soldiers - a young beta who muttered under his breath that Jeongguk was a whore - by having him whipped. In the tense seconds that followed Jeongguk's order, the omega feared the other men would refuse to follow through. But they complied reluctantly, stripping the wailing beta of his shirt and tying him to the posts.

From then on, Jeongguk grit his teeth and pretended he did not hear every foul comment uttered his way. He had always been able to pick and choose his battles. Skill was nothing in the face of high numbers, and Jeongguk was surrounded. Once he was home with his father and allies, he

could deal with the insubordination they'd shown him. Yet another week passed, and Jeongguk had no choice but to circle back around, heading towards the capital in defeat. There was no sign of Taehyung anywhere, and whispers on the wind said that Taehyung and his brother were long gone by now, protected by the Qing emperor.

The omega addressed a letter to Namjoon saying he and his entourage should return in less than three days' time, then wrote a separate letter to Yoongi, in which he confessed to failing in his mission. He had not, and would not, find the bastard prince. Yoongi's task was impossible if Seokjin and Taehyung had already fled the country. Though Jeongguk did not know it, both letters were lies.

They would not make it back to the capital in less than three days' time.

But Jeongguk would find Taehyung.

Jeongguk smelled the alpha before he saw him. It was a cloying scent that pervadesd his senses, filling his lungs and mouth with something musky and sharp. He was forced to get off his horse before he could fall from the saddle, stumbling over to lean against a nearby tree for support.

“Jeongguk!” one of the men called. “What’s the matter?”

Normally Jeongguk would at least bark back at such flagrant disrespect to his title, but he found himself unable to speak. He merely moved, following the smell that he scented in the air. His father’s men clambered behind him, disgruntled and slow. Jeongguk ignored them. He could taste leaves in his mouth, a burst of mint or even sage? The omega swallowed, and his hands began to shake.

He pressed on, brushing past the wide expanse of trees, nearly tripping over logs or rocks or bushes. Jeongguk felt the brush scratch at his side and almost became caught in a tangle of thorns. The scrapes and near bruises were nothing; Jeongguk had suffered worse on the battlefield.

Eventually, he left the forest behind him and came to a stream. Its waters were calm and clear, and yet the scent in the air was different now, *tainted*. Jeongguk saw the faint ripples in the stream, followed by the thick, almost cloudy release of red.

Pain. Fear. Anger.

It was not the first time Jeongguk had smelled such emotions on an alpha, but it was the first time it brought him to his knees. He looked around, almost wildly, as something inside clawed, screamed - *you have to find, comfort, protect. Protect him!*

His eyes followed the flow of red and spotted a figure in the distance, along the bank of the stream. Without thinking, Jeongguk clambered to his feet and ran. The water splashed along his ankles and splattered his fine robes, but Jeongguk had no need for them. There was only the stranger and his desire to save him.

The man was breathing, but barely. His breaths came out in shaky, painful gasps, and he held a hand to his side, soaked red with sticky, dark blood. His nose twitched as Jeongguk arrived at his side, placing a hand along the curve of his neck. In a situation such as this, Jeongguk meant for the gesture to convey his friendliness and unwillingness to harm the other.

The alpha’s eyes, which were squeezed shut in pain, flickered open and focused on Jeongguk’s

face. He murmured something unintelligible, but Jeongguk shushed him quickly.

“Hush now,” he implored. “Save your strength.”

Jeongguk shoved the alpha’s hand out of the way in order to get a good look at the wound. It was deep, reaching so far inside of him that Jeongguk feared something vital has been punctured. Jeongguk was amazed the stranger had stayed alive this long, with how quickly and how much he bled out. The opening was clean and wide; no ordinary dagger cut this alpha down. Jeongguk pressed his hands down in an attempt to alleviate the bleeding, and the alpha let out a strangled yelp in response.

"Sorry, sorry!" Jeongguk muttered. He tried to think of what he should do next, of how he should proceed. There was a heavy clamor behind him, the soldiers having finally caught up. Jeongguk had never been so happy to see them than he was in this moment.

The omega ordered them to help in carrying the alpha. They moved him to a clearing in the woods, Jeongguk pressing his hands to his side at all times as he softly started to sing nursery rhymes, urging the alpha to stay awake. If he closed his eyes to rest, then his sleep would be eternal. Jeongguk then instructed a campsite to be built around them. This was where they would rest for the night, and all the coming nights after until the alpha healed.

He tried to work quickly in order to sew the alpha back up. Even before his father started making Jeongguk attend sewing lessons, the young omega knew how to do so. He learned on the battlefield, watching nurses or fellow soldiers sew his skin in fine, even stitches. They’d always been sure to rub special oils and lotions into the wounds, not wanting to be held responsible for any scars on Lord Jeon’s prize broodmare that might lower his value. Despite all their careful treatment, Jeongguk was left with faint scarring along his stomach, legs, and thighs.

“Get me some alcohol!” Jeongguk commanded, nearly growling. His father’s men moved slowly, too sloth-like for Jeongguk’s taste. It was not long before he simply excused them from his tent altogether, unable to deal with their hopelessness.

The alpha drifted in and out of consciousness, and when Jeongguk finished the stitching he checked his pulse once more, finding it a little - just a little - stronger than it was. Though perhaps that was just his wishful thinking. In the end, Jeongguk could only do so much. He was no surgeon, nor miracle worker. He prayed for a moment, clumsily reciting the words his mother drilled into his head long ago, when their family was starving on the streets and yet still had to give thanks to the Heavens for being so blessed.

Jeongguk was not a religious man, but he hoped that maybe a bit of praying might help. He wished it were Yoongi who had stumbled upon this alpha. Yoongi, whose witch mother had taught him all the salves and remedies she knew, could easily save this stranger from his injuries. All Jeongguk could do was wait and hope.

The alpha's breathing evened out, and he slept for a while. Jeongguk remained at the alpha’s bedside, barely leaving for fear one of his men might go against orders and disturb the stranger as he rested. He was eaten away by worry as well, afraid something would happen if he left, so Jeongguk slept in the same tent that night, kneeling by the bed, and it was not until the next morning that the stranger woke up, fully conscious for once.

The alpha was sweating, emitting a strange, almost sour scent that had Jeongguk’s stomach curdling in distaste. “Water,” he croaked, voice like gravel.

Jeongguk blinked, a little disoriented, but soon hurried to comply with his wishes. His knees ached

as he moved, clearly unhappy with his sleeping arrangement. Jeongguk propped the alpha's head up in order to pour cool water into his mouth, which he gulped down eagerly as if he hadn't drunken it for weeks. Once the alpha was done, his eyes trailed over to Jeongguk's face, squinting.

For some reason, Jeongguk felt nervous at his inquisitive gaze. "Yes?" he said, not really a question yet sounding like one. The omega wondered - almost hoped - if the alpha might say something offensive, a typical sexist remark that would extinguish any sort of the interest he felt.

But the alpha smiled weakly, lips cracked and pale, and remarked, "*Lovely*. So you weren't just a dream."

The stranger's eyes closed again. Jeongguk was nothing short of relieved that the alpha was too exhausted to stay awake and aware, for if he weren't, he would surely see the pleasant pink dusting Jeongguk's cheeks.

The alpha faded in and out of consciousness. Eventually, he was strong enough to hold conversations with Jeongguk, who learned the man was a farmer, nineteen years old but on the cusp of twenty, and went by the name Dowon. Jeongguk spends most of his time at Dowon's side, making sure the alpha's condition remained stable and keeping him calm with pheromones. When he slept, Jeongguk seized the opportunity to drink in his features. Dowon looked almost too handsome to be a simple farmer, but then again - Jeongguk had thought the same of Jimin, the palace servant. But where Jimin was soft, Dowon was hard, built of sharp lines and angles. His honey skin had a healthy flush to it, and a small mole rested on his nose. He was not exactly the most muscular alpha, but his slender form hid a subtle strength to it that Jeongguk can't dismiss.

And his voice - Gods, Jeongguk shivered nearly every time the alpha opened his mouth, even if he was merely inquiring as to the weather or time. Dowon spoke in a deep, soothing tone. He held an authority to his voice, and yet was not ashamed to veil it with softness. The alpha was earnest and kind as well, inquiring after Jeongguk and his family.

"You need to get more sleep," Dowon chided him now, gesturing to the bags under Jeongguk's eyes weakly. "Don't worry about some lower class alpha like me. You should leave me here. You've done more than enough."

Jeongguk shook his head, too stubborn for his own good. He had already gone this far to ensure the alpha would survive. If he didn't see it through, all of his efforts might be in vain. He cleaned the wound carefully, wiping dried flakes of blood off and replacing them with the healing salve that one of his men brought back. He tried to ignore Dowon's stare as it burned holes right through him, but his finger fumbled, face flushing at the attention.

"Focus on getting better and then maybe I won't have to worry about you," Jeongguk muttered, frowning.

"What about your family? Won't they be worried if you don't make it home soon?"

Perhaps Namjoon or Hoseok *were* worried that he hadn't arrived like he promised, and it was fair to admit his father might be the least bit concerned that his prized broodmare had taken a detour - but Jeongguk just couldn't find it in himself to care. A petty part of him was pleased that he hindered his friends and father in such a way, and that he was delaying his inevitable prison sentence - his omegan duty - that awaited him back at the palace. They were content to let him waste away, oblivious. Why should he not do the same?

"They're busy. I expect they won't notice for a little while longer."

Dowon made a noise in the back of his throat. "You said they were merchants, right?"

Jeongguk paused for a moment, before dipping his head in confirmation. He'd lied to Dowon, only because he didn't know where the alpha stood. Dowon had been bleeding out by a stream, his wound the result of an experienced person's attack using a fine blade. There was no way he had been assaulted by mere bandits, as he had claimed. So far, Jeongguk had had bad luck with imperialists. He could only hope that Dowon was on the Bangtan Four's side, that he supported the overthrow of the Kim dynasty.

The omega could have asked, of course, dropped all pretenses and just asked what it was he wanted to know.

But he didn't.

Jeongguk was, as always, afraid he wouldn't like what he heard.

"You probably think it odd they've left me with an escort of nothing but alphas, but they know I can take care of myself," Jeongguk leaned back in the chair he had brought to their makeshift tent.

"And they allow you to dress in more masculine clothes, to carry a sword with you?" Dowon's tone was not mocking, merely curious. Jeongguk wanted so badly to preen at the welcomed attention, the omega inside having been starved of it for so long. He only cleared his throat, though, afraid he would come off as desperate to an alpha he's only just met.

"We didn't always have it easy," Jeongguk hummed. He reached over to run a hand along the casing of his sword, which rested beside his seat. "My father wanted me to learn how to fight, because I am an omega. We lived on the streets for the longest time, and he wanted to make sure his greatest prize remained untouched."

Dowon's smile faltered. "Ah. So it was not a father's kindness which allowed you to trade in skirts for swords, but a businessman's investment."

Jeongguk looked over, meeting the alpha's eyes. It was an action that Weiyoung impressed on him to never, ever do if he wanted to hold an alpha's interest. And yet Jeongguk was glad he ignored her teachings. Doing so allowed him to see the understanding hidden so carefully beneath Dowon's gaze, and his chest constricted painfully.

"Yes," Jeongguk murmured, voice soft. "That's exactly what it was."

If his escorts had been annoying before, they were incorrigible now. Dowon's presence seemed to set them off somehow, each one testy and restless as they formed pairs to sit around and do nothing but complain. They were of the opinion that Jeongguk's money and time was wasted on the stranger he had rescued, and that the wounded alpha's appearance was nothing more than a bad omen.

It eventually escalated to the point that they tried to stage an intervention.

Jeongguk stepped outside of the tent he shared with his patient, intent on finding something for the two of them to eat. Dowon promised he would finish telling Jeongguk of the time his older brother had snuck a pig into their tutor's bed, but only if he brought back an extra helping of soup.

Jeongguk made it a few feet before he realized the men had gathered around him, waited outside just for the opportunity to pounce. One stepped forward, puffing out his chest.

"You spend too much time nursing that alpha, Jeongguk," he chided, a growl following his words.

Another nodded his head, mouth twisted into a frown. "Lord Jeon's omega son, alone with a strange alpha throughout the nights? It doesn't look good. What would you do if word got out?"

Jeongguk flushed, irritated at their overbearing, faux concern. They cared little for Jeongguk's reputation. If anything, their words were lined with a threat, almost admitting that they would be the ones to spread rumors of Jeongguk and the alpha he's taken care of. How else would the news of it reach his father, who was not here to witness anything in the first place?

"He's injured!" Jeongguk replied hotly. "He can barely get out of bed yet, let alone lift a finger to defile my honor!"

One soldier went so far as to place a hand on Jeongguk's shoulder, almost consolingly, as he started, "We're just worried about you - "

Jeongguk elbowed him in the gut before he can say anymore and pushed his way passed the others, nearly shaking in rage. He hated how patronizing they sound, how greasy and vile they were. Jeongguk was seconds away from simply impaling one of them on his swords, and so it was a good thing that they were gone when he returned to the tent with his and Dowon's meals.

Inside, Dowon was standing for the first time since his accident. He was shirtless, as he had been for the last several days, but for some reason the situation was...different. Jeongguk faintly realized that he was right about the alpha's strength. He carried it like a cloaked dagger, hidden from sight, but it was there all the same. Jeongguk's mouth was dry, and he set the dishes down to walk over. He knew Dowon was progressing, but he hadn't thought he was ready enough to begin to walk until now. Without even thinking, one of his hands splayed over the alpha's naked side. His skin felt hot to the touch, the stitches closed neat and tight. Something inside Jeongguk wanted so very much to purr, feeling pleased at the healing of Dowon's wound, the proof of a job well done. He ran a finger along the bumpy, raw threading, to which Dowon let out a low hiss. Jeongguk felt his own breath catch in his throat.

"Are you alright?" Jeongguk murmured. He didn't move his hand.

Dowon let out a faint chuckle, chest rumbling as he did so. "I've been better," he admitted. The alpha sounded a little breathless. "I'd hoped I could get out of bed and back in before you came back. I underestimated how difficult moving but might be."

"You should have waited for me," Jeongguk said, his voice – embarrassingly enough - bordering on a croon. "I would have helped."

"I didn't want you to worry," Dowon admitted, bashful. It was very unalpha-like. Jeongguk found that he enjoyed it. "Or to see me like this...It seemed that all you've ever seen of me was my weakest side."

The alpha leaned his head forward, and Jeongguk realized only now how close they are, just as his breath fanned across his face. If he moved an inch or two closer, they'd be kissing. Something built in his throat, eager and pitiful, but Jeongguk swallowed the whine back. "You're hurt," the omega murmured. "You're allowed to be weak."

They were chest to chest, separated only by the thin cotton of Jeongguk's shirt. Dowon's nose

hovered above the junction of Jeongguk's neck and collarbone, right on top of his scent gland. It was dangerous territory. When Dowon inhaled deeply, Jeongguk believed him to be seconds away from fully scenting him. He felt a rush of warmth at the thought, eager anticipation running through his veins, when instead -

"Was something wrong with your men?"

Jeongguk gently pushed away from the alpha, still mindful of his injury, taking a deep breath of air to cool himself off. "What?" he asked, alarmed and breathless.

He'd been careless, too caught up in the warmth of another. Dowon's concern woke him up from the haze he'd fallen into, and the alpha repeated himself. Jeongguk frowned at the sudden change of topic. "Why do you ask?"

"I heard raised voices, and they smelled...agitated. I just wanted to make sure everything was okay."

"Oh. Well," Jeongguk paused, trying to find the right words. He didn't want to make it into a bigger deal than it was. "We just had a disagreement. They voiced some concerns. I told them they should butt out. It's nothing too important."

Dowon nodded, but Jeongguk could tell that he seemed unconvinced. And even Jeongguk himself could not believe his own words, not when he felt a disquiet tension throughout the camp. The stares of the men were darker, hungrier, and when they whispered to each other, their voices were more sinister. Things had changed for the worst, and Jeongguk knew there was no turning back from whatever this was. The men had chosen their side, just as Jeongguk had chosen his.

It was not until later that night that Jeongguk truly realized just what this meant for him.

By pure chance, Jeongguk stumbled across the conversation. He'd gotten up in the night to relieve himself, and once he had finished, he realized the men still sat around one of their fires. Their voices were raised, loud and proud as they drowned themselves in merriment. Jeongguk shuffled closer, careful not to alert them of his presence. He was curious as to what had them in such a good mood. Certainly the alcohol must have helped. Jeongguk noted several casks on the ground which were nearly empty; the men must've wasted good coin on liquor the last time he sent them into town for supplies. Yet another thing that poked at Jeongguk's nerves.

"I say we go with the river idea," one man belched. "The water will wash everything away, so what's it matter?"

Jeongguk quickly realized that these weren't the sullen beasts of earlier. They were something else, a different kind of monster. Hidden beneath their drunken cheer was a careful scheme of sorts. Yet it was not that careful, if they were discussing their plans so loudly and openly here. Jeongguk's hands curled around the rough bark of the tree he hid behind, eyes peeking out to get a good look at the shadows of the men.

"The water can't wash away marks," another protested.

"That's why we let the dogs tear him apart and shit him out," someone chimed in. "Wasn't that the original plan?"

"I don't want my bitches eating an omega's meat," a voice cried, chortling. "It'll make 'em soft."

Jeongguk's bones froze, turning to hollow ice, so frail and cold that the slightest breath might melt or break him. He barely dared to breathe, afraid that the omega inside of him would let out a pitiful, frightened wail if he did.

Me, he thought. *They're talking about feeding me to the dogs.*

Because what other omega was around?

"You oafs can argue all you want about the cleanup. I'll focus on the main event," one alpha licked his lips laviciously.

Jeongguk shuddered, disgusted. He knew he should just leave right now, turn and run away, and yet he needed to know for sure, needed to hear them say it.

"He's gotta be super tight," the same alpha commented. "Jeongguk's such a prude. He probably can't even make slick."

"Well, he won't be tight once we're done with him," the one who first brought up the dogs leered. "Gods, I can't wait."

"What about the farm boy? What are we going to do about him?"

Jeongguk stilled, craning his neck to hear what they have to say. Someone laughed, and it sounded like that of a braying donkey.

"That fucker's messed up our plans. If it weren't for him, Jeongguk would be out of the way by now. I say we just blame the whole thing on him."

Jeongguk had to close his eyes, mind whirling at the revelation that was a long time coming. He always knew he was not well-liked by his father's men, though their eyes certainly feasted on the sight of him. But to actually hear their true thoughts, to process the ugly, awful things they had planned - passing him around? Then perhaps feeding what remains to the dogs to hide the evidence? There was so much thought put into the whole thing that Jeongguk wondered how many nights they spent discussing his rape and murder, how long they looked at him and wanted nothing more than to break him apart.

"There's just one thing, though. Lord Jeon will know," someone who had yet to speak piped up, sounding almost timid suddenly. "How can he not? He'll smell the treachery on us before we so much as open our mouths."

The leader of the group, the tallest one with a matted beard, threw his head back to laugh. "So? Do you think Lord Jeon will actually care? Omegas are more trouble than they're worth. Lord Jeon had his hands full with that brat. We'll be doing him a favor. We may even get a reward for doing such a clean job of it!"

Jeongguk barely moved his lips, mind blanking at the realization that he couldn't find anything to prove them wrong, and as he did so, he felt it burn up his throat, a stretched out whine just ready to come out.

A rough hand covered his mouth, swallowing the sound before it could give Jeongguk away to the campfire of traitors. Jeongguk's eyes went wide, and he jerked, ready to fight off whoever it was that wrapped their hand around his waist, hot breath spilling against his neck when -

"Hush, lovely," Dowon whispered, voice deep and warm. "You must trust me, yes?"

Jeongguk stilled, processing that it was Dowon who held him now, grip firm and yet not too harsh. The alpha smelled so nice that Jeongguk found his muscles relaxing, and the omega inside nearly sobbed in relief at the comfort it felt. It was not until Dowon's hand came up to wipe away his tears that Jeongguk realized he actually was.

That was – crying.

Dowon met his gaze, jerking his head in the opposite direction. “Come along,” he murmured, moving to clamp down on Jeongguk's neck, where the scent glands were probably due to release a stream of frightened pheromones any second now.

Jeongguk had no choice but to comply, shuffling along as the pair retreated into the cover of darkness, the trees and smell of smoke masking their presence. Once they were an almost safe distance away, Jeongguk found himself reaching up to take Dowon's hand in his own.

The alpha was just what he needed: an anchor to latch onto in this time of distress.

Jeongguk couldn't help but wonder if it was the same for Dowon. If Jeongguk, in saving the alpha when he'd been on death's door, had become an anchor for Dowon as well.

Dowon squeezed Jeongguk's hand tightly.

It was the only confirmation Jeongguk needed.

Once they arrived back at their tent, they began packing. Neither could stay, as there was no telling when the men would act against their liege lord's son or throw out the alpha in his company. Jeongguk felt frightened, more frightened than he had ever felt before, and yet he hated that he was even afraid. He'd faced bigger threats on the battlefield that were far more talented, faster and stronger than Jeongguk himself. The omega could even take any of these men in a fight one-on-one, no problem. But having to face all seven of them at once? Jeongguk was good, but he was no superhuman. There was no way he could win against sheer numbers. Regardless, their betrayal was a little scarier than the hulking shadows of strangers on a battlefield, mostly because it was more personal. These men had been tasked solely with protecting Jeongguk, yet they planned on breaking their vows and assaulting him.

So Jeongguk and Dowon had to run away. There was no use in fighting, not two against seven, with Dowon still recovering. Jeongguk thought that this course of action might be a stab to the alpha's pride, as alpha's instincts were always to charge head first, but Dowon never voiced any complaints.

Jeongguk suggested that Dowon could hide away at a nearby village, for fear a long journey might worsen his wound. To that, Dowon simply pushed his shirt up and smirked. “What wound?” he asked cheekily.

Jeongguk's eyes nearly bulged out of their sockets, and his jaw dropped. “How...” he trailed off, not sure of what he should even be asking. The alpha's skin was smooth, not a stitch or bruise in sight.

Dowon covered himself back up, unfortunately. “I've always healed quickly,” was all he said.

Jeongguk decided not to dwell on the matter. There were matters more pressing than Dowon's supernatural healing that he had to attend to. The omega grabbed his satchel full of letters, along

with anything light and of precious value. It was a good thing he did not care much for material things. All they would do was drag him down.

They decided to leave on horseback rather than foot, before daybreak and as soon as they gathered their things. After sneaking out of their tent and getting halfway to the horses, the alpha paused all of a sudden.

Dowon brought his hand to Jeongguk's shoulder, stopping the omega in his tracks as he hovered over his nape to murmur, "Wait for me, lovely. I'll only be a minute."

Jeongguk wanted so very badly to refuse. He needed the alpha's presence, needed the comfort that it would bring him in his fragile state, and yet he found himself nodding. Dowon left and the traces of Jeongguk's skin he had touched burn at his absence.

The wind whistled by, rustling the leaves and chilling Jeongguk. The omega wrapped his arms around himself and starts to count, agitation gnawing at him. Seconds crept by slowly, minutes even slower. Jeongguk started to worry that this was some sort of cruel prank or ploy, that maybe the alpha had decided to abandon him and fend for himself. It had taken at least ten minutes so far, and hadn't Dowon said it would only take one?

Footsteps sounded behind him, and Jeongguk whipped his head around. He recognized Dowon's shadowy form instantly and sniffed, noting the crisp, copper smell that hid beneath the alpha's normal scent. The smell was familiar, and Jeongguk felt calm wash over him. Though he couldn't place what it was, he knew Dowon was safe. Dowon would help him home.

He did not ask the alpha where he went or what it was he had to do.

They made it to the edge of camp, where the horses were tied to posts. After Dowon had taken one and Jeongguk sat astride his own, the alpha asked for his sword. A frown tugged on Jeongguk's lips, yet he unstrapped the sword from his side and handed it over. He was too emotionally exhausted to question Dowon's intentions.

Dowon went in a straight line, cutting each remaining horse free. He would yip or smack at the ones hesitant to run. The horses whinnied, confused and a little panicked. Jeongguk looked around nervously, but somehow these loud sounds didn't wake up the other occupants of the camp. Soon all of the horses were gone, lost to the darkness of the woods.

"They won't be able to follow as quick if they don't have any horses to ride," Dowon explained. He handed the sword back over to Jeongguk.

The omega curled his fingers around his sword hilt, rubbing at the engraving of his name. He hadn't even thought of something like that. His main priority was simply running away.

"You're rather smart for a farmer's son," Jeongguk teased.

Dowon smiled. If the sun were out, perhaps Jeongguk would be able to fully appreciate the darkness of his gaze.

The pair rode for hours, taking breaks at streams or lakes every now and then so the horses could rest, though they never take the risk of visiting any nearby villages. Who knew if word had spread of Jeongguk's disappearance, if his escorts would plead for help in finding Lord Jeon's wayward son?

Instead they waited until nightfall to stop at a city far, far away from where they were last seen. There was an opening at the first inn they stopped at. When the innkeeper mistakenly identified

them as mates, Jeongguk opened his mouth to correct her, but Dowon wrapped his arm around his waist, pulling him in close as he laughed.

“We only wanted to ride for a bit, but we got a little distracted. Before we knew it, we were lost. I know it’s late, but can we stay for the night at least?” the alpha asked, smiling charmingly.

Jeongguk could barely breathe. Everything that had happened today felt like a fever dream, something that couldn’t possibly be happening. He let out a nervous laugh before burying his face into Dowon’s sleeve, suddenly shy. The innkeeper cooed and waved her hands, then handed over a key to one of the rooms. “Stay as long as you need,” she offered.

As soon as they ventured down the hallway, out of the innkeeper’s sight, Dowon let go of him, albeit reluctantly, and Jeongguk had to pretend he didn’t miss his touch.

It was important that they decide what the next step was and where they should go. Jeongguk had to get back to the palace somehow. Namjoon and Hoseok were probably worried sick, and they had most likely written to Yoongi as well about his disappearance. Jeongguk would have to write them all letters to prove that he was well, then return to the capital as quick as he could. He would leave for the palace right now, if it weren’t in the direction of where they just came from, of what they just ran from.

Jeongguk shivered as the men’s vile words echoed in his head. He was almost afraid of who to trust. Why would his careful father send such vagrants to protect him in the first place? And where were said traitors now? Had they scurried back to tell his father of Jeongguk’s so-called scandal, or did they pursue him even now?

Whatever the answer may be, Jeongguk was reluctant to discover it.

As for Dowon, Jeongguk had no idea where he called home until the alpha vaguely mentioned an older brother down south, which was in the same direction of the capital.

“We can stay together then,” Jeongguk remarked softly, hating how eager he sounded. “Just until we need to part ways.”

The alpha’s lips twitched. “Yes, I suppose we can, can’t we?”

Jeongguk leaned in, partially on purpose, partially on instinct, and found it unreal how easily he molded to Dowon’s side. By the time they made it to their room, the two of them had decided on staying in the area for at least awhile longer, unless bad news arrived in time to chase them off. They couldn’t head back just yet, not when they were unaware of where Lord Jeon’s men had ran off to.

There was only one bed, of course, and Dowon offered to sleep on the floor beside it. Jeongguk protested, fiddling with the ragged ends of his sleeves as he sat on the bed. “Why bother with that?” he asked, puffing out his cheeks. “There’s enough room for two here.”

Dowon stared at him, tilting his head to the side. “You are an omega - a rich, unmated omega,” he murmured. “Do you know what it means, inviting an alpha like me into your bed?”

Jeongguk warmed quickly at that and - oh, even thinks about it for a split second, bringing one of the pillows to his lap as he squeezed his legs together. Clearing his throat, feeling the tips of his ears grow hot, he argued, “It’s no different than before. I knelt at your side for nearly a week, yet nothing untoward happened.”

Dowon swallowed audibly, closing his eyes. He took a deep breath, then another, and finally

nodded his head. "Alright, lovely. Have it your way."

Jeongguk mentally cheered at his victory. He was untouched, yes, and so he would just play off of that. He was innocent, too pure to even consider anything more between them. There was no need to make all of this a bigger deal than it was, because it was not.

This resolution was quickly tested by Dowon.

Jeongguk was, of course, used to the feeling of an alpha's eyes on him. His muscles would tense, every hair on his body sticking straight up as he tried his best not to gag when he noticed a particularly lustful gaze. Alphas were too demanding, too mean and awful. Jeongguk wanted nothing to do with them. This was why his eyes turned to other omegas more often than not, even the occasional beta, because alphas were sickening.

And yet...

When Jeongguk first noticed Dowon staring at him in such a way, he burned. He was coming out of the personal bath to their room, having washed off for the night, when he slid open the door on his way out. He didn't expect Dowon to be right there on the other side, an extra change of clothes in hand. The alpha's eyes raked over Jeongguk's chest and thighs, and the omega noticed them settle on his lower half, hidden from view by a towel. The alpha's tongue poked out to swipe across his bottom lip. For some reason, Jeongguk did not shy away from this alpha's interest. No, he felt empowered by it, stomach clenching and rolling with a sudden heat he had rarely felt before.

Before Jeongguk even knew how he should proceed, he found his body moving on its own. He felt water droplets spill down his body, refusing to wipe them away, and slowly, ever so slowly, arched his head to the side as he bared his neck.

The smell of Dowon's arousal was addicting, as Jeongguk discovered in that moment. It took all of Jeongguk's willpower not to sink to his knees right then and there, letting a moan tear passed his lips. The omega simply stared, a challenge in his gaze as if saying, *Your move, alpha.*

But the same qualities that drew Jeongguk into Dowon's orbit were responsible for pushing him away. The alpha cleared his throat, gaze dark and hungry, and he held out the clothes awkwardly. "Here," he muttered gruffly. "For you."

Then he spun on his heel and ran away.

Jeongguk held the clothes in his hands, mouth opening wordlessly. He knew any other alpha would have pounced, maybe pushed him against the wall, raked claws across his back and sides as the towel fell from his tiny hips. A part of him was grateful that Dowon had the self-control to leave, mentally chiding his own lack of propriety and lapse in judgement. He had surely just embarrassed himself. The other part whined, feeling unwanted and disheartened. Jeongguk knew he was pleasant-looking enough, knew any man or woman would kill to sink themselves between his legs. So why did Dowon leave when offered the opportunity?

It seemed that even in matters such as this, starting a game he had no business playing, Jeongguk was stubborn. He wanted to see sweet Dowon crack, to bring the primal side of the alpha out to play. He needed to know how far he could push this alpha before he gave in, because *oh*, he'd definitely give in. If there was one thing that both his father and Yoongi had impressed on him, it was that an alpha could never resist an omega.

Dowon came to bed that night, but left enough space between them for another person. Jeongguk pretended the distance did not sting. It was only the start of things, after all.

Sometimes, Jeongguk's ignorance worked in his favor. The next day he was given a piece of sweet, creamy cake after lunch, and simply eating it was enough to trigger Dowon's arousal. It was the same when he bent over to pick up one of the letters he meant to send out, and the pleasant, musky scent returned. As soon as Jeongguk would twirl around, daring to stare at Dowon in confusion, the smell disappeared.

The distance between them didn't grow, as Jeongguk had feared it would. Quite the opposite, in fact. Dowon had started to quickly, casually scent Jeongguk throughout the day. Sometimes he would even grab Jeongguk's hands, just to have something to hold on. Jeongguk was again reminded of how unalpha-like his alpha was.

He desired Jeongguk, of course, but he *saw* him, too. The alpha would listen, nodding along or offering his input whenever Jeongguk spoke. He asked questions, sometimes taking Jeongguk's wrist in his hand, thumb roving over the glands there. Dowon did not shy away when Jeongguk spoke of fighting, when he held the alpha's gaze and straightened his shoulders.

Dowon never told Jeongguk to put his sword away, never mocked him when he boasted he was better at fighting than most alphas his age, and instead looked at him with a bright sort of wonder in his eyes. That's all it took to enamor Jeongguk, who was not used to attractive alphas being kind and patient as well.

Jeongguk knew that if he wanted to pursue anything, he should at least go through with the proper courting rituals. Scent marking, gifts, a presentation of a collar...

The problem was, however, that Jeongguk didn't have that kind of time.

Though Jeongguk was allowed a sword, allowed to partake in a rebellion by fighting on an open field, he had somehow been babied his entire life. Even when his father first allowed his sword lessons, there was always a servant or cousin to brush away his tears. On the battlefield, Jeongguk was never without a beta chaperone of sorts to guard his virtue. It wasn't until the Uprising succeeded that Jungkook traded in his chaperone for a collar, to ward off any unwanted bite marks he might encounter on the little missions he was allowed out on. His father and tutor had stressed the importance of protecting his worth, and yet Jeongguk found no comfort in remaining untouched.

He knew what awaited him back home. He would remain unspoiled until a proper match - probably with some portly, rich old alpha who already had a nice harem of young omegas to fuck - would be secured. Jeongguk would be reduced to a toy instead a person, something nice to look at and use a few times before he outlived his novelty and was discarded. Jeongguk was an anomaly as an omega, after all.

An omega who dressed in pants instead of the skirts he should, who cut down alphas and betas alike, beating his so-called "superiors" in battle every time? Whoever he mated would have a nice time claiming him. They'd show him off, proud at first that they were able to tame such an unruly thing, but after a while, Jeongguk would become too defiant, too angry and wild.

Jeongguk was not stupid. He knew this would happen, and he hated it..

So when he was around Dowon, when he caught the older alpha looking his way, he'd tilt his head to the side, maybe bat his eyes or curve his lips into a pout. Dowon obviously liked pretty things, so Jeongguk would just have to become pretty. He started baring more skin, letting his shirt slip

every now and then to expose his shoulder and neck, and he kept the collar that Yoongi had given him for protection at the bottom of his bag. Perhaps Jeongguk was being stupid, too drunk off of pheromones to think straight, but the last thing he wanted was to be constantly protected - least of all from Dowon.

They stayed for another night, and the same tug of war seemed to be going on between them, though Jeongguk could tell their dynamic had shifted when Dowon invited him out to the market on the third day. The two of them visited one stall after another, admiring both the gimmicks and rarities they found. Jeongguk noticed that the alpha's eyes seemed to sparkle as he interacted with one stranger after another, and a wistful smile soon grew on his face. Jeongguk was shy, choosing to hide behind Dowon when any of the vendors or a passerby would turn their attention towards him.

It felt very much like a date.

Jeongguk found himself wandering a few feet from Dowon's side, drawn away by the shine of pretty jewelry on a nearby stall. There were dozens of necklaces to admire, though none compared to what he once saw around Jimin's throat. His chest ached at the thought of the pretty servant he'd been enamored with, and so he shoved those thoughts from his mind. Jeongguk looked over a set of silver, dangly earrings and even paused to admire a ring in the shape of a butterfly, but then he saw it.

The hairpin was one of the most beautiful things he'd ever seen. All of the ornaments back at the palace would look gaudy and unrefined when placed next to it.

It was a golden lily, embedded with pink and green jewels along its fragile petals. Jeongguk ran a finger over it longingly, foolishly, before he slowly retracted his hand. The hairpin was too expensive and pretty for Jeongguk, who wore his hair short and dressed in masculine clothes.

Before he knew it, Dowon's hand reached out, covering his own. "The hairpin," he murmured into Jeongguk's ear. "Do you want it?"

"I, I couldn't possibly," the omega stuttered out bashfully.

But Dowon ignored his protests and bought it for him. He even went so far as to card his fingers through Jeongguk's dark locks, clipping the hairpin in place carefully. He moved back to get a good look and hummed in approval. "It really does suit you," the alpha praised, cupping the omega's face as his eyes gleamed.

Jeongguk blushed and ducked his head, embarrassed by the gesture and flowery words, by Dowon's hand pressed hot against his cheek. He knew that most might mistake it for a courting gift. Jeongguk wasn't foolish; he didn't expect anything more than a brief affair, though he did think of it, how nice it might feel to call Dowon his.

In this moment, here and now, Jeongguk could let himself pretend.

("Oh, my." The baker whispered, a sort of fascination in her voice. "All seven of them?")

The seamstress nodded her head and drew her thumb across her neck in a wide, sweeping arc. "Split from ear to ear in their sleep. By bandits! Or at least that's what the hunter who found them says."

“And what about Lord Jeon’s son? Weren’t they escorting him?”

“That’s just it,” the seamstress murmured, sounding a little distressed suddenly. “They haven’t found any trace of him yet.”

The baker raised a hand to her mouth in horror. “The poor dear,” she gasped.

What they didn’t know was that the subject of their pity stood a few feet away, safe and sound with a healthy flush to his cheeks as he admired the wares being sold.)

Dowon shook Jeongguk's shoulder in the middle of the night and whispered there was urgent business he must tend to. Jeongguk grumbled, still sleepy, and squinted in an attempt to get a good look at the alpha. He was already dressed, even appeared to be set for a journey. Dowon promised to be back by daybreak, and he surged forward to press a chaste kiss to Jeongguk's cheek before hurrying out. The omega was too tired to appreciate the alpha's affections, and so he settled back down for some peaceful sleep.

Except his dreams were not peaceful. It was almost as if his body had recognized that there was no longer an alpha by his side and took this as permission to do what it wanted, to think up anything it can.

Jeongguk dreamed of things he’d barely even imagined before, too flustered and shy when awake to conjure such scenes. He thought of Dowon’s hands on him, all over, his mouth kissing him, breath hot against his face. He woke again as something inside started to yearn, tightening and spasming as a sudden wetness appeared. A hollow ache was there, something he’d only ever felt once before for Jimin, and he knew that he wanted Dowon, needed Dowon. He’d never seen a knot before, barely heard the servant girls whisper about such a thing amongst themselves, but Jeongguk knew he wanted one now. He wanted Dowon inside of him, pushing in and leaving him bare, open and yet full. Jeongguk wondered if it will twist, how good the stretch might feel, and before he knows it, his cock was hard and his hands were along his sex, rubbing fast, quick motions as he searched for something that he didn’t quite know the name of.

He whimpered - because it was not enough, it would never be enough - and gave up. His fingers were wet with slick, practically soaked in it. Jeongguk at first moved to wipe it off on a towel by his bedside, to make sure to get rid of the scent in the morning, but then -

His body moved on its own, taking his slick-covered fingers and rubbing them along the glands in his neck. Jeongguk wondered if Dowon would come up behind him as he usually did for a sleepy morning hug, taking a whiff as if Jeongguk didn’t notice. He imagined Dowon pressing his nose against the junction of his neck and shoulder, nostrils flaring and pupils dilating as he smelled the remnants of Jeongguk’s slick there, the aftermath of the omega’s fever dreams involving the alpha himself.

More slick gushed out at the image, and Jeongguk curled into a ball of sorts, bashfully covering his eyes as a smile played on his lips. He wondered what Dowon would do if he ever smelled the wetness of his cunt, if he’d go to his knees and lift up Jeongguk’s skirts or even just press his long, rough fingers inside. Jeongguk almost squealed at the thought.

He was growing tired of this game, of how slowly the gap between them closed. Dowon was more stubborn than he expected, too kind and chivalrous. Perhaps he had underestimated Jeongguk's attraction, or perhaps he worried he might have to take responsibility once the act was done.

Jeongguk wanted to growl in frustration. He didn't expect anything more than a quick tumble, so couldn't Dowon drop his honorable persona?

Jeongguk eventually dozed off this way, neck and fingers dipped in the same slick that coated his thighs, as agitated and aroused as ever.

The next time he woke, it was to breaking glass and a sharp intake of breath, Dowon's heavy scent filling the room. Jeongguk raised his head, disheveled and disgruntled at the intrusion, bottom lip pushing out into a pout as he sat up.

"Oh," Jeongguk blinked. He met Dowon's dark gaze, who stood in front of the door, hand clenched tight around the handle as some broken fixture lay at his feet. The alpha's nostrils were flaring, and his face was fixed into something frightening.

Jeongguk's sex throbbed, a phantom ache from the night before. A reminder. The omega felt his lips curve into a grin, and he slowly pushed the blankets around him to the side. "I was waiting for you," he said, breathless.

And Dowon broke.

The alpha was on him in a split second, mouth meeting Jeongguk's for a hungry, savage kiss that was more teeth than lips or tongue. Jeongguk let out a moan as Dowon's teeth caught on his lip, splitting it open. Dowon paused to catch his breath, tongue flicking out to lap up the blood smeared across the younger's mouth.

"You'll be the death of me," he growled, and his hands found their way to Jeongguk's hips, wrapping around them easily.

Jeongguk grinned, his own hands tugging insistently at Dowon's shirt. "You can't die yet," he whined. The omega's hips wiggled eagerly, canting up in the futile hope he might find some sort of friction. "At least knot me before you do, yeah?"

Dowon threw his head back, exposing his smooth throat, and groaned. It pleased Jeongguk even more to see Dowon pleased, and when the alpha surged forward to scent him eagerly, Jeongguk basked in it. He reached over to rub his wrist against Dowon's own, and the smell in the air became intoxicating, a lovely melding of both their scents. Jeongguk almost wished he could smell like that all the time, that he and Dowon could fuse together and become one, because then Jeongguk would never have to be alone.

Dowon slid his own shirt open, then nearly ripped the omega's nightgown open in his haste to get him naked. Jeongguk squirmed as the alpha lavished praises onto him, as he leaned his head down to suck marks into his collarbones, teeth pressing down in loving bites.

"I knew something was off. Smelled you from miles away," he snarled, grinding down on the younger's crotch. Jeongguk whimpered. "So fucking wet, aren't you?"

"You're dumb. It's all your fault," the omega blabbered, to which Dowon only laughed.

"Did you think of me while I was away, lovely? Did you wonder how my knot might feel inside your virgin cunt, filling you full of pups?"

Jeongguk shivered at the image that conjured up, at the thought of his stomach swelling with child, undeniable proof of his lost virtue. He wondered what his father would say, pictured the man's purple face shriveling up in horror, his fists shaking with rage at the sight of his ruined son. Jeongguk couldn't help but smile, bumping his nose against the glands in Dowon's neck. He found

he wouldn't mind getting pregnant, especially if it made his father so mad. It was just a fantasy, however. Jeongguk was only brave enough to face his father's wrath inside his own head, and pregnancies hardly ever happened when one was not in heat.

He nosed along Dowon's shoulders and neck, mouthing gentle, wet kisses along his skin.

"For working in the fields, your skin was so fine," he commented drowsily, almost drunk off of pheromones.

And yet this was the wrong thing to say. Everything went quiet, as if the world itself had frozen in time. Dowon himself stilled, his grip on Jeongguk's ass loosening. The alpha's mouth tightened, and his eyes dulled, clouded by some sort of inner turmoil.

"No," Dowon pulled away, voice husky and almost angry as it bordered on a growl. "This wasn't fair to you. It's not right."

Jeongguk squirmed, cold at the loss of warmth. "What do you mean?" he couldn't keep the whine out of his voice even if he tried. "I...I want this. I want *you*."

Did Dowon not understand how painful it was for Jeongguk to admit such a thing, to bare himself so? All the alpha did was shake his head at Jeongguk, as if the omega were nothing more than a foolish child. "You don't know what you want - Gods, you don't even know me!"

The rejection stung so fierce that Jeongguk reeled back, as though he'd been slapped. He felt his excitement and arousal dissipate as he let out a deep breath, chest rattling with a sort of emptiness only one other person has ever caused. How had things gone so wrong so fast?

"I want to know you," Jeongguk argued. He reached out to grab a hold of Dowon's arms, trying to draw him closer, and smelled his own pheromones in the air, soft and sweet. He hoped that they might lighten the mood, perhaps entice Dowon to stay. His hopes were in vain, for the alpha pushed him away gently, shaking his head.

"Stop, Jeongguk!" he snaps, frustrated. "Just stop it!"

As Dowon began to dress, tugging his shirt back on and tying the pants at his waist, Jeongguk remained bare. His stomach and neck were covered in dark marks, and there were even scratches along his shoulders. They hadn't even - they never - and yet Dowon's eagerness to leave made Jeongguk suddenly feel very dirty. Used. The slick along his thighs, exposed to the air, felt as cold as ice. Jeongguk curled almost into a sort of ball, bringing a sheet up to cover his pitiful, wretched body.

Was he too tall? Too broad or muscular? Weiyoung always said he would need to appear softer if he expected an alpha to stomach his masculine looks. Should he have lined his eyes with kohl, or fixed his hair with pretty adornments as Jimin had taught him? Dowon hadn't seemed to care about any of those things before, so where did Jeongguk go wrong now?

"This was a bad idea," Dowon muttered. "A mistake. I should've left as soon as I healed."

Jeongguk swallowed the wail that threatened to tear his throat open. He didn't understand what was going on, why Dowon was suddenly having second thoughts about his interest. "So what? You would have left me with those men? Would you have sentenced me to death, after everything I did to save you?"

Dowon paused, mouth twisting unpleasantly, and he fiddled with the ties of his cloak. Jeongguk

took a deep breath. He reached out, hand shaky, for the final time and said softly, "Dowon. Dowon, I love - "

The alpha slapped his hand away with such force that Jeongguk hissed in pain.

"How can you love a man you do not even know?" Dowon cried. He did not look at Jeongguk as he said this, so the words didn't seem to be aimed at the young omega. Yet they hurt him all the same.

Jeongguk started to shiver, nose sniffing quietly as the heavy tears began to build behind his eyelids. He had cried over Jimin, too, he realizes. The pretty omega had lied to him, called him a murderer and slapped his hand away. Just as Dowon did now. Was it simply Jeongguk's fate? Was he cursed? Worthless? If not, then why else would those he cared for throw him away?

I am always the problem, he thought. I am an unlovable, selfish creature. I tried to woo over Jimin when I knew he didn't like me that much. I sought an affair with a strange alpha in favor of carrying out my mission. The Gods are not kind, but they are surely just. This was my punishment for refusing my filial duties, for chasing after that which can never be.

As a testament to his selfishness, an anger festered inside him, burning away the tears as quickly as they'd come. Jeongguk was not some weak flower, wilting in defeat. When a hand crushed him in its grasp, it would open back up with deep, fresh wounds of its own. Jeongguk's thorns were as sharp as his blade, his laugh spiteful and mean. "Oh, I get it!" he tittered. "I understand now."

Dowon's eyes narrowed. "What?"

"You're scared," Jeongguk challenged, lifting his chin up high. "Poor Dowon...you're so slender, hardly any muscle at all. My mother once told me that alphas like you are so weak they can hardly even knot."

He had insulted the alpha's strength and virility in one go. Jeongguk wondered if Yoongi would be proud of him. Dowon made a sound, a sort of displeased snarl, and he raised his shoulders, slightly puffing out his chest.

Jeongguk almost hoped the alpha would throw his hand forward, perhaps to wrap around his throat. Jeongguk's blood was boiling, racing through him at speeds he'd only ever had on the battlefield. But Dowon was full of disappointments today. He did not lash out as Jeongguk expected. Instead he just stood there, insults on the tip of his lips.

"Don't flatter yourself, *lovely*," he sneered. The pet name - once pleasant - was now tainted with unpleasantness. "The only ones I ever knot are real omegas."

Something in Jeongguk cried at that, wounded and bleeding, but he did not let the hurt show on his face for more than a second before he bit back, fueled by the raw emotion the comment brought.

"Funny. Because I thought you were a real alpha," Jeongguk snarked. He threw the sheets off of him. Rising slowly, dressing even slower, he flaunted his ruined skin as the air grew thick with a smell that urged him to wail in distress. Dowon watched and waited, gaze perhaps even hungrier than when their tumble first began. "And real alphas don't worry about virtue or looks or even consequences, do they? They're greedy, foolish oafs. All they do is *take*. They use whatever they can get their hands on until it breaks, but you couldn't even do that one thing right, Dowon."

"Did you think you were special? That I could not have chosen someone else instead?" Jeongguk settled with looking over his shoulder, a glare fixed on his face. He took a step towards the door,

resting on its handle. "Maybe I should find someone in the inn - maybe even in the streets! - I'm sure any alpha would do a better job of fucking me than you."

Dowon was silent for a moment, the tension in the air so great that Jeongguk held his breath. He wondered for a moment if Dowon would break, if he'd lurch forward and dig his claws, his teeth, into Jeongguk's flesh. Part of Jeongguk still wanted him. Another part, a more primal side, wanted to snap at his neck, rip a hole through the exact same place he so carefully stitched back together.

"Fine," Dowon sneered. "Go ahead and fuck some lowlife from the streets. I'm not the least bit surprised. You've always been a needy little thing, so eager for any knot you could get your hands on. If you want to lower yourself in such a way, who am I to stop you?"

Jeongguk froze, and he felt his body, his very pulse, thrumming in outrage. "Lower myself?" he said, quiet and calm. He turned around, stepped forward with one foot and then another, until he was nearly an inch away from Dowon's face. "You're mistaken if you think *that* would lower my reputation. I've already hit rock bottom."

A shaky grin grew on Dowon's face. "Oh, how so?" he sounded like a man trying to be brave.

Jeongguk leaned in, mouth teasing the shell of the alpha's ear. He heard Dowon take a deep breath, scenting him for what was perhaps the last time.

"The second that I let your filthy, common hands grace my skin," Jeongguk stated, controlled voice lacking any emotion, "I was ruined."

He shoved the alpha away hard and before Dowon could even so much as blink, Jeongguk was gone, door slamming shut behind him. Once he was out of the alpha's sight, he allowed the tears to freely fall, blurring his gaze as he ran from the scene of the crime, the ruthless murder of his heart. He didn't know where to go, didn't know for sure what he planned to do next. Jeongguk wondered how long it would take to unscramble the ruins of his heart and mind.

He thought of the palace, of Yoongi and Hoseok and Namjoon.

He thought of home.

He had been under for too long, playing around with daydreams and illusions that poisoned him slowly, gradually. Never before had he felt like such a fool.

I've had enough of dreaming, Jeongguk realized. It's time to wake up.

Chapter End Notes

Below you will find my reasons for deleting Pomegranates & Wine:

for a while now, since i completed Pomegranates & Wine in fact, i had contemplated merging the two stories. when i first decided to make the taekook interactions-and eventual vminkook interactions!-a side story in the form of P&W, i planned on having it much bigger than it was, involving a lot more than it did and spanning the entirety of Rising Sun.

....that didn't happen. it ended up being only a fraction of the story i wanted to tell and left readers from Rising Sun who didn't read it and readers from Pomegranates &

Wine who didn't read Rising Sun confused.

as a result, i felt like Pomegranates & Wine had not served its purpose, and was essentially useless. this was encouraged by the fact that i had not properly tagged it. a few readers were disheartened to discover i planned on having VMINKOOK as endgame. i foolishly thought that people would be coming from the main story, not finding it on its own. they would know vminkook was what i had in mind, right? wrong. i'm an idiot and that's on me. i have since tried to correct this with proper tagging and such things, but because of this oversight, i feel like i gave readers the impression that taekook was the focus, the endgame, and i don't like that.

I don't like P&W being on its own, misleading readers, so I have made the decision to delete it off of A03. I would like to thank everyone for all their kind comments and support, their kudos and bookmarks, and any time they spent reading it. The second chapter will be edited and updated to Rising Sun sometime this week, so don't get too excited if you see another update that fast!!

Again, thank you and I hope that you can respect my decision to do this. P&W is not gone forever, and none of the plot I have already written will change!!

Settling In

Chapter Summary

Seokjin becomes Jin and, though he doesn't know it yet, meets an ally.

Chapter Notes

tw: panic attack & abstaining from eating, even when hungry (i don't know whether it warrants anything as extreme as an eating disorder YET, but i thought there should be a warning of some sorts....)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

When Seokjin was done bathing, Maria had a servant's uniform set out for him: black shoes and a thick, brown hanbok pleated with grey. She fixed a bandage to his cheek to cover the ugliness and explained to Seokjin that the grey designated him as a servant in the kitchens, which she guided him to soon after. "You'll only be in charge of washing dishes and clearing off tables for now," Maria said. "We certainly can't trust you to cook any of the food yet. I still have to run a background check."

Seokjin fought the urge to frown. "What does the background check entail?"

"You'll have to have papers, proof of where you've come from. The papers can be from a former owner or something as simple as a birth certificate."

Seokjin nodded his head, as if it would be no problem at all, but inside he panicked. He had no forgeries to back his claim. Seokjin had come to the palace with nothing; it seemed he would soon leave with nothing.

He glanced over, the smell of frying meat drawing his attention. There were maybe ten people at most cooking. "They're the only ones preparing lunch?"

Maria didn't seem to catch the only part. "We have thirty kitchen servants in total serving the court, but we'll need more soon. When the new king is crowned, the imperialists will at last join the court, and it will take more than thirty to feed them."

It was laughable. The kitchens looked empty with so few scurrying around them. Seokjin's father had always had at least one hundred employed to take care of all their needs. Did the rebels know so little about running a palace that they would employ so few?

Some of the servants spared Seokjin a glance, and he noticed the tension in their gaze, dark and searching as they raked over him. The lot of them were ugly and unkempt, their faces squished or uneven. Seokjin couldn't help but turn up his nose as he walked passed them. He was better than these commoners. Why should he act like he was not?

"Suran!" Maria called, beckoning a small, blonde girl over. "This is Jin. He's going to be placed on

dish duty with you. I hope I can trust you to train him properly?"

The girl bobbed her head eagerly. "Of course, Miss Maria! I'll do my best!"

Maria gave a hum, pleased with her response, and glanced at Seokjin. "I'll leave you here then. Suran will show you the rest - how to work and where you'll sleep. If everything checks out, you'll be set. If not-"

She jerked her thumb behind her back meaningfully. "You'll hit the road."

"Of course," Seokjin nodded. "I understand."

Once Maria had left, Suran's demeanor changed drastically. The girl crossed her arms over her chest and fixed Seokjin with a look. "You'll learn as you go along," she sniped. "I don't have the time to teach you, so just watch and follow, got it?"

Seokjin's left eye twitched. "Got it," he said, as pleasant as could be.

Whatever. It couldn't be that hard. It was just washing dishes.

It wasn't so much that the work was hard - it was that it was tiring. They had to go into each of the rooms in the east wing and collect the dishes, then bring them back to the kitchens. What little food left over was thrown in a bin as scraps for the pigs or dogs. The empty dishes were then scrubbed and dried, along with all the utensils used to make the meal. If a mess was made, then Seokjin or one of the other servants on dish duty would hurry and clean it before it could stick or stink. Just as they finished cleaning dishes, a cook would swipe it back and use it to prepare the next meal. It was an endless, repetitive cycle, one that Seokjin abhorred.

The skin on his fingertips was like raisins, wrinkly and soft, and he found himself sweating as he rushed plates and teacups from one room to the next. "Don't they have handmaidens or manservants to get rid of their tea?" he hissed at Suran.

To Suran, it was like Seokjin was speaking another language. "What are you even talking about?" she sneered.

Seokjin felt like throwing his hands up in the air, ready to scream, because shouldn't she know something as simple as that? Nobles had personal servants to do the tasks that Suran and Seokjin were doing. The least they could do was clear the tables in their stead.

"Nevermind," he said instead, lips forming a thin line of quiet rage.

He'd noticed that the rooms they cleaned were less elaborate, stripped of all the beautiful furnishings that had once been there. Just the sight of how empty and barren the rooms were made his chest ache. He wondered if the furniture and tapestries had been auctioned off on the black market, or perhaps simply burned.

"You're a quick learner," Suran said begrudgingly. "It didn't look like you would be."

Seokjin frowned. "Are you saying I look stupid?"

"Not stupid. Just like you have your head in the clouds all the time. Like you're a real priss," she offered.

Seokjin gave her a dark look - one that the smaller girl ignored easily as she hustled off to toss her

pile of dishes in a soapy basin. "I'll have you know I'm not some spoiled brat!" he called, catching up with her. "I've had my fair share of hardships!"

This was only half of a lie. Seokjin was most certainly spoiled, and the only real physical work that he'd had to do up until now had been practicing with his sword. His lessons on that were all that kept him from passing out as he ran from one room to the next, collecting dirtied plates.

Suran rolled her eyes at Seokjin's declaration. "Well, duh! You wouldn't be here unless you hadn't, yeah?"

Seokjin paused, considering her words. "Right," he said slowly, beginning to frown.

"I will admit, though," Suran began, "that I wondered about you. Besides the bandage, you're almost too pretty to work here, Jin."

The casual use of his name, even if it was only a variant of it, grated his ears. "What? Are you saying everyone else here is ugly?" Seokjin asked, amused.

Suran looked around, still continuing to scrub at the plate in her hands. She lowered her voice, "I think it's just that none of them are as pretty as you. Well, except maybe- "

"Jin!" one of the cooks called. "Over here! Some sauce has spilled."

Seokjin clicked his tongue, but obeyed nonetheless. Even though it felt like he'd been working for weeks with all that he'd done so far, it was still his first day on the job. He couldn't afford to be disobedient.

Once he returned to washing dishes with Suran, the girl had completely forgotten about what she'd been saying. Instead, she started to talk about what would come next.

"After the nobles have finished with their supper, we can eat sit down and eat any of the scraps we want," she said - and dear Heavens, she sounded happy about this! "If there aren't enough, the cooks have permission to make a small meal to share with everyone."

Seokjin nearly choked. "So that's it? Scraps for the most part, maybe one meal if we're lucky? Do we at least get fed breakfast?"

Suran looked at him like he'd grown another head. "No. Why would we?"

Seokjin felt faint. Were they no better than the pigs or dogs, licking the nobles' dirty plates as they were told? Seokjin had trained with his father's kitchen servants, who boasted often of the light meals they would cook for themselves throughout the day. It was a universal truth - hungry cooks did not make good cooks.

"It won't last long," he murmured, sure of it. "We'll drop like flies if that's the case."

For the amount of work the kitchen servants were putting in, it would take more than that to keep them properly nourished. Hunger could make people do stupid things. If something wasn't changed, what little organization there was to be had in the kitchens would soon fall apart.

A pleasant thrill ran through Seokjin at the realization. It seemed he wouldn't have to do much at all here.

As they continued their work, Seokjin asked Suran about where they would sleep, wondering if the servants' quarters were still in the same place. She informed him that because Seokjin was an

omega, he would share his rooms with five omegas - who just so happened to be the only other omegas employed in the palace.

“The majority of servants are betas,” Suran explained. “Maria would have probably only hired betas if she could. She says they’re more reliable since they can’t smell pheromones and don’t need designated time off for ruts or heats.”

“Does Maria know what she’s doing?” Seokjin pondered. “What makes her qualified to handle all of this?”

The beta’s eyes widened as she shushed him, looking around to make sure that no one had overheard. “Be quiet! Maria runs things around here! You don’t want to make her mad!”

Seokjin merely ducked his head, appearing thoroughly chastised, though inside he was seething. Suran had evaded the question, and in doing so, answered it. It seemed the Bangtan Four had filled his home with fools and beggars, yet another slight to his pride.

Once most of the servants were allowed to eat, Seokjin chose to continue washing dishes instead, assessing those gathered. Ten cooks, twenty kitchen hands. The palace rooms weren’t even a quarter of the way filled with nobles or guests; this was the only reason the entire kitchen system had not yet imploded.

“Aren’t you hungry, boy?” One of the cooks spoke up, gesturing to a plate of scraps that was just waiting for someone to pick through it.

Seokjin could feel hunger clawing at his stomach, yet the thought of eating made him feel faint. He hadn’t seen the food prepared, and it had been passed between too many hands. Who knew what could be in it? “No, thank you,” he rejected the offer politely. “I’m not hungry.”

He would never be poisoned in his own home again.

Suran frowned. “Then what are you going to eat?”

Seokjin merely shrugged, but no one pressed him on the issue, each of them all too eager to eat the scraps in his place. It didn’t take long before Suran had finished picking through the plates. She and Seokjin finished another load of dishes before they were dismissed, and Suran brought him to his quarters. There were four omegas already there. One was sleeping while another read, and a pair were off to the side, giggling as they played cards on one of the beds.

“This is Seokjin. He’ll be staying with you from now on. He works in the kitchen,” Suran introduced him.

None of them looked up. Suran cleared her throat, but still, they ignored her. The beta turned to him. “They’re usually not this *rude*, ” she said pointedly. “Don’t worry. You won’t see them too often. They work in other parts of the palace. Stable duty, I think?”

One of the omegas finally gave a squawk, looking up from her book. “Stable duty?” she spluttered. “You liar! I’m a scribe!”

“Well, how should I know that, Leah? It’s not like you bothered to introduce yourself,” Suran shook her head and gave Seokjin a light pat on the shoulder. “I’ll see you tomorrow morning. Six o’clock sharp. Good luck with this lot. Looks like you have competition for the most stuck up.”

Seokjin bristled only a little, staring at Suran’s back as she left. He still did not know what to think of her. The omega turned to the the girl who had spoken up, Leah. She was already back to

reading, though her cheeks now had an angry flush to them.

Seokjin didn't let himself feel too offended. It was for the best that these people not show interest. Creating a full backstory would require more effort than he liked to expend. He made to sit down on an unoccupied bed, but a loud sputtering from another omega had him pausing. "I wouldn't do that if I were you," one of the scrawny boys playing cards warned. "That's Jimin's bed!"

He said it as if Seokjin should know who he was. The former prince looked down, finding that there was a chest of sorts beside the bed, as well as a grey hanbok lined with gold.

"Got it," Seokjin said slowly, moving on to the only other bed available. Just as he had sat down, however, the door opened and Maria came striding in, a wide smile stretched across her face.

"You passed the background check," she announced. "From the sounds of it, you caught on quickly to the work here as well. We'll keep you on."

Seokjin lowered his head, eyes to the floor as he murmured his gratitude. Inside, he was nothing short of confused. How on earth had he managed to pass the background check? He hadn't given Maria anything to go by, and yet here she was, handing him back official papers - albeit stained and torn - with a knowing, gentle smile on her face.

Seokjin narrowed his eyes as he scanned them over. They were government documents tracing him back to a gisaeng house, just as he had told her. Written across the top was "Par k Ji • n" in shaky, familiar script, with a black splatter in the middle of his first name and space in the last. Even the age was around the same, only a few months younger than Seokjin himself.

It was perfect. Almost too perfect.

Maria's voice softened. "Your former madam is here to see you. She's the one who brought your papers?"

Yerin, Seokjin knew. There was no one else it could be.

"Really?" he murmured, clutching the papers to his chest as if he were simply overcome. "She's too kind."

Maria led him out into a hallway, then down another and another until Seokjin realized they were headed to a different wing of the palace. She brought him to one of the rooms he knew to be empty. The most extravagant fixture in it was the gisaeng who sat in one of its plain wooden chairs.

Yerin wore a puffy green hanbok covered in silver cherry blossoms, her golden hair spiraled up and pinned with a jade comb. Her lips were painted a dark red, cheeks flushed with rouge. "Jin!" she called immediately, rising to embrace him. "Oh, look at you! So clean and taken care of!"

She turned to Maria. "You've done a splendid job, my dear! Why, if I hadn't known already, I would have never thought he'd been in an accident!"

Disemboweling an alpha in the busy streets of a capital - was that what classified as an accident nowadays?

"They've all been so kind, Madam," Seokjin played along, dipping his head graciously. "And generous, to have given a job to someone such as myself!"

Maria flushed and waved her hands. "Captain Joon is a generous man," she huffed. "I did next to nothing."

“Miss Maria, if you wouldn’t mind, could you give us some privacy? I wish to ask Jin details about who it was that attacked him. I won’t ever allow that man in my establishment again.”

Maria bobbed her head. “Yes, yes. Of course.”

As soon as the woman had left, Yerin dropped her hands from Seokjin’s arms. Her warm expression closed off, turning into its usual indifference as she stared at him. “It is a good thing I know Maria. Her father used to sell fish and oysters to my house. One of her servants told me of an omega - a former gisaeng at that - with a scar on his face, and asked if I might have some paperwork to back his claims.”

“How did you create a fake so quickly?” The forgery itself looked real enough.

Something darkened in Yerin’s eyes. “All of it was real,” she explained. “I had a boy similar in age and dynamic whose paperwork I used. All I did was blot out a few characters. Though I’m surprised that someone such as yourself would use such a role to hide.”

“A gisaeng is a cover story I have no shame in presenting,” Seokjin gave a half-hearted shrug. “I suppose I should be flattered that you think I would do well as a gisaeng, what with my face looking as it does.”

Yerin frowned. “It’s not your face that needs the work. It’s that attitude of yours.”

Seokjin merely turned away, annoyed. “You were tailing us this morning,” he remarked.

“Yes, and it’s a good thing I was. Who knows what would have happened if I hadn’t stopped Taehyung?”

And how convenient it was, that she’d been following them, that she was quick enough to save Taehyung from himself. Again, Mun Kai’s words nagged at Seokjin, speaking of a doctor and a witch. “The doctor sold us out,” Seokjin informed her sharply. “Kai Mun said as much.”

“A pity,” was all Yerin had to say.

Seokjin bunched his hands into fists, then slowly unclenched them. He wanted to press on, asking her why Taehyung had been half-enchanted to leave his side and just how Mun Kai had known where Seokjin would be on that day, but now was not the time. Yerin had forged Seokjin’s papers for him. She had saved Taehyung’s life and most likely still kept him under her household’s protection. Seokjin could not make an enemy of her yet.

“Is Taehyung alright?” he asked instead. “Though I suppose you wouldn’t be here otherwise.”

Yerin cleared her throat, nodding as the corners of her lips quirked upwards. “Taehyung is safe at my house. I’ll send him to the countryside to hide for a few months. A guard or two of mine will go as well, just so we can be sure he won’t try some daring, suicidal rescue attempt.”

Seokjin cracked a smile. “Yes, that does sound like Tae, doesn’t it?”

There was a silence between them, fonder than most if only because the both of them had the same person in their thoughts.

“Have you told him then?” Seokjin finally asked. “That I will be serving the rebels here?”

“Not yet,” Yerin shook her head. “I am almost afraid to, for I know of the wrath that will follow. Taehyung is a gentle boy, but he has his father’s temper at times.”

“Can I send you a letter to give to him? I want to tell him myself.”

Yerin paused for a moment before she finally agreed. “There is a bird in the aviary that is used for my establishment. A pigeon named Winter. Send your letter and any after it with her. I’ll pass them on to Taehyung.”

Seokjin exhaled, shaky breath rattling his chest. His throat swelled, almost overcome with emotion. If anything else, he could tell that Yerin would always be on his brother’s side. “Thank you, Yerin. If it weren’t for you, my brother would be dead.”

“And you, my prince,” Yerin said, though her eyes were cold. “I’m doing it for you as well.”

Seokjin smiled thinly, knowing her words were a lie. The only reason Yerin would ever help Seokjin was for Taehyung. Yerin reached up to her hair, unpinning the jade comb. She ran a finger over it, and her gaze grew soft as she held it out to Seokjin. The omega took the comb, albeit hesitantly, as Yerin gently explained what it meant.

“You are not the first gisaeng that this palace has collected. While you were recovering at my house, I sent several of my best as moles. If you are ever in need of friends, my prince, then wear this comb. They’ll know you stand on the same side as them.”

Seokjin curled his fingers around the comb tightly and drew it to his chest. “You are too kind, Yerin. I will remember this.”

Just as I will remember your lies.

“Good luck, Crown Prince,” Yerin murmured, eyes catlike as she smiled. “You will surely need a lot of it.”

After Seokjin ducked his head and left, he realized that Maria was not standing out in the hall waiting for him. Perhaps she was too busy, or she thought Seokjin could easily retrace his steps and make his way back to his rooms. Either way, she was right not to worry. Seokjin had grown up in these halls; he knew them by heart.

He decided to check a few other rooms in this wing of the palace, as earlier that day he had not been granted this one and his curiosity ate at him. He recognized the banners that hung up above, decorated with black bats, but he could not place the name that would go with them. Seokjin was so lost in his thoughts that he did not notice the other servant who was rounding the corner as well, carrying a tray full of glassware. The servant let out a soft yelp as they ran into each other and lost his grip on the tray. The glass tinkled as it fell to the floor, tray banging right after it.

“Shit. Sorry. I didn’t see you there,” the servant muttered, not giving Seokjin a second glance as he bent to pick up the glass carefully.

As Seokjin stared at the broken glass before him, stark white against the velvet rugs, his thoughts froze, taking him back to that day not so long ago. He remembered the glass he had fallen on, the shards piercing his soft, perfect cheek. There were those hands again, grabbing at him like he owed them something, like he owed them anything at all. Slowly, he sank to his knees.

His eyelids fluttered wildly, and he pressed his hands against them to keep them shut, disgust and frustration and fear welling up within him. Seokjin wanted so much to scream - at Yoongi who had betrayed him, at Jae and Lord Mun who had died, at Taehyung who had left him to rot, and at himself, who refused to die.

“Hey, are you alright?” a soft voice asked. Something warm wrapped around his hands, drawing

them away from his eyes.

No, no, no. I am not alright. I am weak, so terribly, stupidly weak, and I am not fit to wear the Phoenix on my back. Just leave me behind like everyone else.

The other servant did not. He stayed, bringing Seokjin in close as he murmured gentle words, all of it melding together into nonsense. His words soon became a croon, and Seokjin realized that this was the other omega in the palace, the one he hadn't been introduced to yet. It made sense then, why he was so eager to comfort Seokjin. An omega's first instinct would always be to comfort their fellow omegas, at least when they did not feel threatened by them in any way. This omega did not feel threatened by Seokjin, and for some reason that just made him feel worse.

Be strong, he thought, returning to himself in quick, loud breaths. *The Phoenix's son shall not falter.*

"I'm fine," Seokjin said, somehow finding his voice. He let out a deep breath before he opened his eyes, meeting the worried green stare of the servant before him. Seokjin pulled away immediately, to which the other let out an anxious hum.

The former prince smiled in a way he hoped was assuring and gestured to what was most definitely a broken tea set. "I'm sorry about all of this," Seokjin offered. "You can tell whoever it belongs to that it's my fault, not yours. I'll take responsibility."

The servant laughed, though it sounded hollow and sad. "It was already broken," he admitted. "I was getting rid of what was left, that's all."

Seokjin held out his hand, splaying the bare wrist up. "Jin," he introduced. "I work in the kitchens as of today."

The other stared at his wrist for a moment, perhaps taken aback at Seokjin's forwardness. It was not everyday you rubbed wrists with a stranger. Seokjin wiggled his fingers a little. "C'mon, you saw that total breakdown of mine, yeah? You know more about me than most now."

The servant's lips quirked and finally he offered his wrist and name. "I'm Jimin," he said. "I am - well, I was - a personal servant to Jeon's son. Now I'll probably just go back to mending and washing clothes."

Seokjin lifted up a piece of glass. "Did he dismiss you because of this?"

He started to help Jimin collect the shards, putting them back on the tray, though he was sure to slip the largest piece inside his sleeve. There was no way he was going to take Captain Joon's words at face value. The only person looking out for Seokjin was Seokjin himself, and he would need something to protect himself with. Seokjin knew that if a knife from the kitchens was to go missing, it would eventually cause a stir and launch an investigation. But a glass shard meant for the trash? No one would ever know.

"I suppose," Jimin said, then corrected himself. "Really, though, it was a lot of things."

Seokjin noticed the attire that Jimin wore - a grey hanbok pleated with gold, much like the one beside his bed back in their quarters. Did gold signify a personal servant, or did it signify placement in the Jeon wing of the palace?

"Does this wing belong to the Jeon clan?" Seokjin asked.

Jimin shook his head and pointed down the hallway in the direction he'd been coming from. "Lord

Jeon has control of that wing. This wing is for the Min clan, though there's hardly any of them here."

"No, there wouldn't be, would there," Seokjin murmured, glancing around.

Yoongi's remaining family was comprised of an uncle with one son and six daughters, as well as an aunt with one daughter. Any extended family had been lost to the sweating sickness years ago. Even if his family was to leave the Min estate behind and travel to the palace, they would take up very little room. Besides that, Seokjin knew for a fact the minor lords under Yoongi's command despised him for the simple reason that they did not like to take orders from an omega. Yoongi's only allies seemed to be the other members of the Bangtan Four.

Seokjin did not - would not *ever again* - pity him.

"I'll see you later, Jimin," Seokjin said, standing and wiping his hands on his hanbok.

Jimin looked up and for some reason paused. He stared at Seokjin's eyes, opening and closing his mouth wordlessly.

"Is something wrong?" the former prince asked.

Jimin jerked, as if startled, and shook his head. "No," he murmured. "I suppose I'm just seeing things, aren't I?"

The servant's words were rather cryptic, but Seokjin didn't spare them a second thought. This Jimin did not know who he was, did not even see Seokjin as a threat.

He had nothing to worry about.

Right?

Chapter End Notes

i really wanted to have a scene where seokjin confronted yoongi, or at least caught sight of him, but it just wasn't working with the flow of the story. i struggled a lot with this chapter because i kept wanting to put in certain scenes way too soon. i had to set the scene a little more, what with jimin and jin meeting, as well as the structure (LOL what structure) to the palace.

honestly BECAUSE i was struggling, this chapter took a lot longer than it should have, especially since the majority of this has been written for weeks....all i can say is sorry....

twitter: [Selenellene](#)

A Declaration of War

Chapter Summary

Jin encounters trouble with his fellow servants. Jimin only wants to help.

Chapter Notes

tw: bullying, abstaining from eating, slutshaming (insults, such as 'whore', which are aimed at a former sex worker) i feel like there is another word for this but for the life of me, i cannot remember?? google failed me too so ://

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

When he returned to his room, a muffled chorus of laughter greeted him. The other omegas hushed as Seokjin made his entrance and stared for a moment, smirking behind their hands as they looked away.

“What’s so funny?” Seokjin asked pleasantly, though he felt anything but.

They only giggled some more and glanced at each other, smiles growing. He brushed it off as childish gossip, the sort of malicious thing only simpletons did, and approached his bed. Immediately, he knew something was off. The thin sheets were slightly rumpled and a black, dusty powder peeked out at the corner near his pillow. With one swift movement, Seokjin threw the sheets off. His bed was completely covered in the soot from the fireplace, foul words splayed across in streaky font.

G O H O M E W H O R E

Seokjin’s fists clenched around the sheets in his hands, and he heard the other omegas explode into laughter, so very pleased with their clever teasing. He thought of raking his hands across their faces and tearing them to shreds just like he had Lord Sam, and he found himself smiling. The giggling quieted at that, and he could tell they were watching him, waiting for something to break.

Was this the worst they could do? Pathetic. Seokjin sat down on the soot that covered his bed, smearing it over with his hands. He then leaned over to take off his shoes and even began to hum pleasantly to himself. The former prince was a master at these sorts of games. He wouldn’t be intimidated so easily, and by his lessers at that.

He settled in his bed, ignoring the feeling of soot against his back. He wondered if they were taken aback at his disregard for their prank, or if maybe they just felt challenged to do more. It didn’t matter. They’d learn their lesson in time.

In the middle of the night, Seokjin almost thought he heard someone crying, weeping Taehyung’s name.

But he slept on, convinced it was a dream.

Being a kitchen servant gave Seokjin access to each wing of the palace. This meant he could enter most rooms with ease and acquaint himself with the nobles there. He learned what they liked to eat and what they wouldn't so much as look at. Seokjin also managed to pick up on nervous ticks or habits of theirs. Lady Jeon was allergic to crab. Lord Jung had a certain order to how every dish had to be placed before him. Lord Woo had a bad habit of biting his stubby nails, and his favorite granddaughter had to have a cup of wine with every meal.

It was the little things that he noticed. The little things that he would use.

Seokjin only had to ask another servant for the directions to Lord Jung's study, where all his scrolls and ink were kept. It took more work to visit Lord Woo's granddaughter. The Woo Clan had been responsible for finding the next Kim candidate. Though they garnered nowhere near the amount of support as the Jeons, the court held a certain regard for them. Once Seokjin accessed the chambers of the youngest granddaughter's chambers, it didn't take much to get his hands on her favorite golden chalice.

Just like most of the servants, it seemed the guards were inept as well.

The one wing Seokjin avoided was the Min wing. Once he knew where he could easily find Min Yoongi, he did whatever he could to stay away. Seokjin couldn't risk seeing the young lord, even if his fingers itched to grab a hold of his pale, pretty neck and squeeze. It would be foolish to give away his disguise for a few seconds of revenge.

When servants were called forth to prepare new rooms in Yoongi's wings for several relatives that had been summoned, Seokjin made himself scarce. Maria and her underlings visited the kitchens for a set of extra hands, but Seokjin had quickly busied himself with taking a plate to Lady Jeon's rooms, ducking passed the older beta and her followers as they stood in the doorway. This left Suran and the others to take care of any new Min nobles, of which Suran admitted there were few.

"There was a girl and her servants," Suran informed him after dinner one night, as Seokjin again refused to eat. "That was it."

Seokjin frowned. "Only a girl...I wonder why Lord Min summoned her," he muttered, mostly to himself.

Suran shrugged as she slurped her leftovers, wiping at her face. "Who cares? Anyways, you look a lot thinner," Suran pushed her bowl forward. "Eat!"

"I've been eating. It's not that," Seokjin insisted, smiling and shaking his head even as his insides groaned in protest. He could not stomach the foul slop of the palace, would not dare to sip a drop of acrid wine. His throat burned as the memories resurfaced, and he found the strength to refuse once more. "I'm overworked. Stressed. That's all it is."

Suran frowned, eyes narrowing as she lowered her voice. "Is it those omegas you room with? I heard they've been causing you--"

Seokjin interrupted her, rolling her eyes. "It's nothing! They just like to play stupid pranks on me. You shouldn't worry."

Just the other day there had been nails in his shoes, and when he'd come back that night, his sheets had been soaked in pig's blood.

Suran slammed her bowl on the table, soup sloshing. "I'm not worried!" she snarled.

The kitchen quieted at her outburst, several pairs of eyes turning her way. It was known that Suran had a sharp tongue, but she hardly ever raised her voice, preferring to say her snide comments under her breath. Suran flushed at the attention and looked away. "I'm not," she muttered, standing to leave. "Why would anyone worry over you? You're like a rock."

Even as she left, Seokjin continued to smile, as if the two of them had shared a funny joke. Eventually, the other servants looked away, and it was only then that Seokjin allowed his shoulders to tremble.

He cleared his and Suran's place, then left to wash up before bed. It was what the other omegas always chose to do.

The servants' baths were busier than usual when he arrived. He noticed Leah there with the other omega girl, who served as a personal servant to Lord Woo's granddaughter. The both of them giggled once they noticed him, speaking in loud whispers.

"He probably had to wash the filth of his patrons off," the unnamed girl cried as he passed them. "Gisaengs work all night and all day. He has to get ready for the next round of customers."

Seokjin didn't so much as flinch. He just continued to walk over to the less secluded section of the baths, where he could make sure his back stayed facing the wall at all times.

"Is Jinnie shy?" Leah called, eyes hateful. "Oh, I know! He probably doesn't want us to see the whore tattoo on his back."

At this, Seokjin froze. It was the wrong thing to do.

"You're right, Leah! Look, look! He doesn't want us to see it! It'll just prove he's a slut, won't it?"

He did not dare turn and look, but he could hear the two omegas leave their bath water as their feet slapped against the floor. He started to walk again, but a wet, cold hand tugged on his arm, stopping him.

"Hey, Jin!" the servant girl giggled. "Why don't you show us your back? I've always wanted to see a gisaeng tattoo."

Leah joined her, arm looping in between Seokjin's on the other side. She gripped the hemming on his shoulder. "Come on, Jinnie!" she sneered. "Show us, yeah?"

Seokjin gritted his teeth. The indirect teasing he could take, but Seokjin was not used to such face-to-face conflict. He hardly dared to move, afraid he would knock one of their heads against the hard floor, again and again and again.

No matter how much he wanted to, he couldn't. Seokjin had to play it safe. He did not know how much Maria would tolerate, especially if someone as new as Seokjin stirred up trouble. So he merely shoved them away.

"Stop it," he said. "You're disgusting. Why would you want to see another omega naked?"

The one omega flushed, mouth gaping, but Leah put her hands on her hips as she narrowed her eyes.

"Well, you're not a proper omega, are you?" she hissed. "Whores don't have modesty, so why are

you so shy?”

Seokjin’s lips curled into a smirk. “My body is more of a temple than yours will ever be, Leah. I suppose your jealousy is what makes you curious?”

Leah slapped her bare foot against the floor, shaking her head as her whole body seemed to tremble. “Shut up! Shut up! Shut up! You’re hiding your tattoo just like you hide that ugly face of yours!”

Seokjin underestimated her. He hadn’t expected her to go for his cheek, and so as he pulled away from her before she could grab the foldings of his hanbok, he was too late to stop her from knocking aside his bandage.

His shoulder hit the ground, water from the baths splashing his clothes. He shivered, the beast on his back screeching in protest as they trampled on his pride. Seokjin was forced to dull himself to the laughs and jeers of his lessers as they insulted him loudly to the crowd of silent onlookers, if only so he wouldn’t be consumed by the dark.

“He really is ugly. Isn’t he, Ru?” Leah taunted.

“I guess we know why he couldn’t be a whore anymore! Whores are supposed to be pretty, after all!” Ru agreed, cackling.

“I wonder what other scars he must have under all of those clothes then,” she continued. Leah’s own brief daring must have inspired her to make a go of it, for Ru reached for Seokjin’s clothes next.

He took a deep breath.

Fuck caution. I’ll kill her, he resolved.

Seokjin imagined catching her own face with his fist and spitting her cheek open. He was so caught up in this fantasy that he didn’t even notice someone else had grabbed a hold of Ru’s wrist, squeezing so tightly that something popped. The noise caught his attention, and Seokjin watched as the girl began to cry, letting out a shrieking wail. Her assailant let go almost begrudgingly, watching as she sank to her knees and clutched her wrist.

It was Jimin.

The pretty omega flexed the hand he’d used to grab Ru and made a show of wiping it on his clothes. “What are you doing?” he asked.

“J-Jimin,” Leah stuttered, moving away from the scene.

“Leave Jin alone,” Jimin warned, voice low and dangerous. “Even with that scar, he’s prettier than you’ll ever be.”

“Why is it any of your business?” Ru whined. “What do you care?”

The same question was on Seokjin’s own mind. Jimin only fixed Ru with a look.

“I heard the both of you go on and on about whores. You’d think you’d remember how much I hate that word.”

Leah shook her head. “We didn’t mean it, Jimin! I swear! We were just teaching the new omega

his place and all! I mean, he's a...a..."

She caught herself before she could go on, eyes staring at the floor as she wrung her hands nervously.

"He's what, Leah?" Jimin crossed his arms over his chest, raising his eyebrows. It was only with this stance that Seokjin realized just how ridiculously muscular the other omega was.

Neither of them dared speak as they looked away, faces pale and eyes teary. "Get out," Jimin commanded. "Before I do something I regret."

They scurried off like mice, and Seokjin felt Jimin's hand close over the shoulder he'd landed on, resting on top of the mark on his back. His skin tingled as Jimin helped him to his feet.

"Show's over," the other omega barked at the crowd of bystanders. "Mind your own business!"

Seokjin let out a laugh, watching as they all ducked their heads and resumed their bathing. This soft, pretty omega was more than he initially seemed.

"It seems like every time we meet, I'm a mess on the floor," Seokjin commented.

Jimin's features softened, voice almost strangled as he spoke. "I wish we would not. Here, let me look at your shoulder."

Seokjin jerked away. "Thank you for your help," he said, voice tight. "But I didn't want them to see it for a reason."

"I'm the last person here who will judge you for a gisaeng tattoo," Jimin looked around. "Let me take you somewhere else. There are too many eyes here."

"No, I mustn't -" Jimin's hand gripped his bruised shoulder hard, eyes conveying a sense of urgency as he stared at Seokjin.

"Really, *Jin*," Jimin moved his thumb across the flat of Seokjin's back, atop the golden slope of his phoenix's wing. "I *insist*."

Seokjin gritted his teeth, feeling his unease spike. He had no choice but to obey.

Jimin took him to the private bath in a Woo room. It was to be occupied in a month's time by some lesser lord loyal to Lord Woo, but for now it was empty. Jimin made sure the door was locked behind them.

Seokjin tensed, hyper aware of Jimin's searching eyes and downturned mouth, going over and over again in his mind what concern his being bullied was to the other omega. People did not just help others out of the kindness of their hearts. Jimin must have wanted something from him.

"There's some warm water here," Jimin started by saying, sitting on the edge of the tub. "And some herbs and spices. I wanted to make sure we didn't have an audience. The others have witnessed enough of your humiliation."

"Humiliated?" Seokjin insisted. "What are you talking about? They're just sheep, and lions don't"

"-concern themselves with the opinions of sheep," Jimin finished, never leaving Seokjin's gaze once. "Yes, yes. I've heard that before. But you are not a lion now, are you?"

Seokjin froze. It was the truth, the point of his whole disguise, so why was he still...

A habit. An ugly, bad habit that he needed to get rid of. Nobody knew he was the former prince. Nobody *could* know. He was Jin, a palace servant and former gisaeng. It was only right that the other trash treat him like trash.

He could not afford to think like Prince Seokjin anymore.

“You need to stand up to them on your own,” Jimin warned. “They won’t leave you alone just because I helped you out. If anything, they’ll want to get back at you more.”

He looked away, sighing. “The less of a reaction you give them, the more determined they’ll be to see you crack.”

“Do you speak from experience?” Seokjin tilted his head to the side, curious as he took a step forward, clutching protectively at the folds of his shirt.

Jimin turned, and with one quick movement, untied the knots of his grey hanbok. The top of it slid off of his shoulder, spilling down his back, and Seokjin drew in a sharp breath. The tattoo was the first thing he noticed. The black ink had faded slightly, but it still spelled out ‘gisaeng’ plainly for all to see. The mark told a long, painful story - one Seokjin was almost afraid to hear.

The second thing he noticed was the engagement collar; he recognized the green emerald, the silver fixings and adornings of it, and yet for the life of him, he could not remember just where he had last seen the necklace

A second later, Jimin pulled his hanbok tight, shielding the tattoo and collar from view again.

“We are a lot alike, Jin,” Jimin remarked wistfully. “Or at least it seems so. That is why I helped, why I concerned myself with you back there.”

Both revelations were shocking. That Jimin would be a gisaeng - an engaged one, no less - seemed too strange, too out of character for the sad, demure omega. Seokjin felt himself at a loss of words, unsure of how to proceed, of what he was supposed to do with this information, especially as his own suspicions and paranoia began to recede.

“You have to get them back, and do it in such a way that they fear you. Don’t just think you’re a lion. That won’t get you anywhere. You have to act like one.”

Seokjin thought of the reverence with which one of the omega boys had said Jimin’s name, of how everyone went out of their way to avoid the pretty servant.

“Is that what you did, Jimin?” Seokjin murmured. “You made them fear you?”

Jimin drew back, eyes like fire. “I did. The other omegas and I were employed at Lord Paek’s summer house before the Uprising. Back then, they tried to bully me just like they did you, but when I taught them a lesson, they didn’t dare raise a hand again. You have to fight back, Jin, even if you don’t want to.”

“What would you say,” Seokjin said, feeling almost giddy at what he was about to impart, though he didn’t know why, “if I was to say I already had?”

Jimin paused for a moment. “I would ask if you’d cleaned up after yourself.”

“Of course!” Seokjin smirked. “The servants are around only when called and the guards on duty

spend all their time sleeping or drinking. It's almost too easy.”

Seokjin’s hand reached moved towards his shoulder, splaying over the top of it protectively. The clothing there was damp from his fall in the baths. He thought of the secret that had almost been exposed today, a result of his own negligence. It wouldn’t happen again. “I had hoped to see them one final time in the baths. I thought they might bully me, especially when I’m more vulnerable.”

Jimin frowned, but waved his hand for Seokjin to go on.

“I don’t want them to just fear me, Jimin. I want them to *owe* me,” Seokjin admitted.

The servant stared at him, and there was something different in his gaze, dark and piqued. “So the little sheep has sharp teeth, hmm? I suppose you didn’t need my help after all.”

“No,” Seokjin protested, voice firmer and louder than he would’ve liked it to be. “Don’t think that. I’m grateful, Jimin. I really am.”

For some reason, he meant it.

Jimin’s eyes cleared, the brightest that Seokjin had ever seen them, though the shadows beneath remained, as well as the sharp lines of his face. He moved closer, leaving his place at the tub, and reached a hand for Seokjin’s face.

The former prince couldn’t help but flinch, especially as the other’s cold fingers traced over the scar across his cheek. “It’s healed and yet you wear a bandage still? Why?”

“It’s ugly,” Seokjin stated. He ignored the instinct that urged him to lean into the other omega’s side and feel a comfort he’d been denied for so long. “Nothing more than that.”

Jimin shook his head, mouth twisting into a frown. “Don’t say that. This scar doesn’t make you ugly. How could you say that?”

Slowly, Seokjin lifted his own hand, pushing Jimin’s away and taking its place. “It is a symbol of my greatest shame,” he admitted, voice strained and quiet. It almost physically hurt his throat to get the words out. “My failure and my defeat.”

Jimin was quiet for a moment. He turned and fumbled with something beside the tub, perhaps at a loss of words. Seokjin stood there, waiting in silence for Jimin’s response. There was only the sound of moving water as Jimin dipped a rag into the bath. He wrung it in his hands, brow furrowing, before he turned to Seokjin.

“I think I can understand that,” Jimin said, holding out the rag. “Here. Your scars are your own. You need share them with no one.”

Seokjin took it. “What’s this for?”

Jimin jerked his head towards the tub, a weak smile playing on his lips. “I’ll keep watch so you have privacy. The servants’ baths are almost never empty. You should clean up your shoulder here. Make sure you’re not too hurt.”

A few drops of water fell to the floor as Seokjin squeezed the rag. His throat felt tight of a sudden, and he didn’t really know what to say.

“Thank you, Jimin,” he settled on offering.

The words tasted odd in his mouth. Seokjin rarely thanked anyone, and if he did, it was never genuine. And yet he found himself being honest with Jimin, who had offered his help solely because he felt the two of them were kindred spirits.

Seokjin, against all reason, felt the same way.

Seokjin saw it in his dreams, spread out between Taehyung's tan hands. The emerald pendant glinted in the sunlight, and Seokjin remembered reaching out to run his fingers along the silken fabric and silver chain.

It was clearly an engagement collar, a declaration of Taehyung's devotion.

Long ago, Seokjin had an engagement collar of his own. It was simple, made mostly of white ribbon with detachable ornaments. It was the prettiest thing he'd ever owned, and some nights he would hold it in his hands delicately, staring at it for hours before he fell asleep. After his first fiancée died, he had hidden the collar under his bed, too guilty and frightened to hold it. To this day, Seokjin felt as if his gaze alone would sully its beauty.

Taehyung's collar was expensive and elegant, yet it couldn't hold a candle to the one Seokjin had been given.

"It's beautiful, yes," Seokjin had eventually admitted to Taehyung, raising an eyebrow. "But who is it for?"

Taehyung grinned, eyes twinkling. "Someone I love very much, hyung," he murmured, almost dazed. "I hope to introduce the two of you soon."

Seokjin found himself smiling back. "If they make you this happy, Tae, then I look forward to meeting them."

Of course he did. Seokjin couldn't wait until he had a chance to interrogate the newest bloodsucker that had latched onto his baby brother, intent on driving them away with whatever means necessary. Taehyung had the worst luck when it came to his love life, probably because he found most of his lovers in gisaeng houses of all places. Taehyung had never brought any of them to the palace so far. Perhaps he knew they would not be safe from their father if he had.

It was known that Taehyung's affections burned twice as bright, but lasted half as long. Taehyung often mentioned his lovers in passing, but never before had he said anything at all about an engagement. Seeing the proof of it in Taehyung's, hearing his brother speak of introducing his newest leech? It didn't sit right with Seokjin.

And yet Seokjin never saw the necklace again.

He didn't hear any more of Taehyung's affair, whether the collar had been accepted or rejected, or perhaps whether it was even given in the first place. The Crown Prince heard nothing from Taehyung himself or any of the servants concerning the matter, and because of this, he'd assumed the whole affair was over.

Seokjin hadn't thought of it until now, as he laid awake in bed, unable to fall back asleep as he dredged up memory after memory, a chain reaction of sorts. Because he needed to answer the question that plagued his mind, a revelation that was too coincidental to be true.

Why did Jimin wear Taehyung's engagement collar around his neck?

Jimin first learned something was wrong when he saw the guards practically tripping over themselves in their haste to arrive at the youngest granddaughter's quarters. He asked a passing servant what had happened, to which the beta just shrugged his shoulders.

“I heard them say something about a servant? I think someone stole something.”

Jimin frowned, a sense of unease washing over him, but he continued on with his duties. After Jeongguk had been sent away on his mission, Jimin's role had been transferred from the son to his mother. Now he was in charge of ironing Lady Jeon's clothes, bringing her meals, and lending an ear when she felt as if no one else was on her side.

Her youngest son was a lot like her in that respect.

As he prepared her tea that afternoon, she was in one of her better moods, though the unbearable heat of the afternoon had flushed her face. “Did you hear about what happened in Lord Woo's household?” she asked, sounding gleeful as she fanned herself frantically.

“I was told someone stole something,” Jimin admitted. He kept his eyes lowered.

“Not just someone,” Lady Jeon smirked. “But a servant? Can you imagine? How bad it must look for Lord Woo!”

Lady Jeon's catlike eyes softened as she gazed at Jimin. “I don't have to worry about such things. I run my household properly. Only the best are allowed to serve the Jeon Clan.”

Jimin bowed his head, as if her words honored him, but his stomach rolled in disgust. He hated her pretentious tone and proud smile. “My lady, if you don't mind me asking...the servant?” Jimin licked his lips, which were suddenly dry. “Who was it?”

Lady Jeon paused in her fanning and tilted her head to the side. She looked Jimin up and down, pity and contempt alive behind her eyes. “Well, I suppose you'd know them. You omegas all live crammed in one of the servants' rooms, yes?”

Jimin could not help but think of Jin, who was playing games he did not truly understand. Jimin should've warned the other omega that the schemes of the palace were different than those in a gisaeng house. At a house, you might go without food or be beaten for misbehaving. A mistake at the palace, however? It could cost you your life.

“Did you happen to hear a name, my lady?” Jimin tried to keep the eagerness out of his voice, but knew he had failed when Lady Jeon laughed.

“And what will you give me if I tell you, little pig? Nothing in life comes free to your kind. That is why you work here now, for a roof over your head and food in your belly.”

Jimin clenched his fists. It didn't matter really. He would hear the news later if he did not hear it now. He'd see it for himself if the omegan thief's execution was to be public. And yet he had to know now. He needed to.

But what could a poor omega, a servant with nothing, offer Lady Jeon, a noble who had everything?

“My dancing,” Jimin spoke before he really knew what he was saying. “You did say you wanted to see me dance, my lady.”

Lady Jeon was no longer smiling, eyes dark and piercing. “That's very tempting,” she hummed. The

beta was silent for a minute, before finally she made a decision. "I shall have you dance at the first banquet our future king hosts. Do you know what this means?"

She leaned in close, breath fanning across Jimin's face as he tried not to flinch. "If you make one mistake, I'll gut you like the little pig you are."

He jerked his head, nodding, and Lady Jeon leaned back, skirts rustling. She looked over in the mirror, appraising her sweaty face. Her makeup was beginning to run, and her intricately pinned hair was coming down. Lady Jeon let out a sigh as she pushed a stray strand of hair behind her ear.

"Ru," she told Jimin. "The omega's name was Ru. With any luck, she'll be beheaded tomorrow morn."

When Jimin left Lady Jeon's rooms, several guards were waiting for him outside. One stepped close, taking a deep whiff of Jimin's scent. "He's an omega, all right," the alpha sneered.

Jimin looked back, barely catching a glance of Lady Jeon's smile as the door slid shut behind him. Ah, this was part of her game then. Did she expect him to call for her? To panic and begin to cry? Jimin refused. He had been forced into far more intimate positions with far more intimidating men before.

"What seems to be the problem, sirs?" Jimin asked, voice like honey as he looked up at them with dewy eyes.

Another guard shifted around, clearly uncomfortable and cleared his throat. "We're supposed to take you in for questioning," he explained.

Jimin tensed, hand rising to his chest in shock. "Questioning?" he gasped. "What have I done?"

"It's clear he doesn't know anything," the alpha guard butted in, rolling his eyes. "Can't we just leave him be? His scent is turning sour. If he can't handle this, then how do you think he'll react to being questioned?"

The other guard - a beta - frowned. "Orders are orders. They come from Lord Woo himself," he said, voice tight. "And it's just a few questions. If you truly haven't done anything wrong, you have nothing to worry about."

Jimin bowed his head and curtsied low. "Then I will obey Lord Woo's command."

Jin, he thought, as frustrated as he was frightened. *What have you done?*

It was the throne room that they brought Jimin to. The room was larger than he'd expected, with tall marble pillars spaced in a column on each side. The furnishings were rather plain, which confused Jimin. Where was the late queen's prized statues, her tapestries and jewels? There were only a few banners spread across the room, the newly adopted sigils of the Bangtan Four already trying to cement their place in history. Perhaps what was most shocking of all, however, was that there was no one sitting on the throne. It was empty.

Where was the Kim candidate whom the rebels bragged of endlessly?

Instead there was a long table before the throne, and at it five people. Four men, one woman. An omega, three alphas, and one beta. Jimin recognized Lady Jeon's husband, of course, as well as Captain Joon and Lords Woo and Jung. Yet the omega was unfamiliar.

“Servant Jimin, an omega in Lord Jeon’s household,” one of the guards introduced, giving Jimin a slight nudge forward.

Jimin bowed his head, curtsying as he bared his neck just slightly. He hoped the angle would be low enough, if he went any further then his collar would show.

“Lords, Captain, Lady,” Jimin addressed, unsure of how exactly he should do so.

“You may rise,” Lord Jung waved his hand, clearing his throat.

Jimin obeyed, albeit slowly.

“She’s no lady,” one of the other lords muttered.

The woman at the table smiled tightly, refusing to ignore the comment. “My cousin is readying himself for a long journey tomorrow,” she declared. “I know that it is presumptuous of me to try and fulfill his position, but I - “

Lord Woo rolled his eyes. “For Heaven’s sakes, girl, spare us the dramatics. Can we please get to the matter at hand?”

“Right,” the Min representative agreed, her voice strained. “Of course.”

“Hyewon,” Captain Joon spoke up. “Come forward please.”

It was Lord Woo’s youngest granddaughter, and the most spoiled too. Her face was a mess, eyes swollen and red. Her lips seemed to be set in an eternal pout.

“You said when you went to have your wine this morning, your favorite chalice was gone?” Captain Joon asked gently.

Hyewon gave a firm nod, bottom lip trembling as her eyes watered. “I had Ru put it away last night, but when I needed it this morning, it was missing.”

“Did the servant ever seem confrontational or resentful towards you?”

“Ru was formerly employed at an imperialist household with the other omegas. Could she be an imperialist supporter?” Lord Jeon piped in.

Captain Joon sent Jeon a meaningful look at the interruption, clearly not liking how he had disregarded his own question.

Hyewon paused. “Well, I don’t think so. She’s always jealous of how pretty I am, though.”

The Min representative covered her laugh with a cough. “Of course, Hyewon. Well, did you see Ru take the cup?”

“No, but-”

“Were there any others that saw her take the cup?” Captain Joon asked.

Hyewon’s lips twisted into a frown. “I don’t need anybody to have witnessed it to know that she did it! Ru was the last one to touch it, and the only one to know where I kept it!”

“Very well, Hyewon,” Lord Woo grumbled, shooing his granddaughter away. “Step aside now. You, boy? What do you make of all this?”

Jimin flinched as Lord Woo pointed a finger at him. "Pardon, my lord?"

"You live with Ru. Did you happen to see her bring back a chalice to your room the other night?"

Jimin bowed low, head nearly pressed up against the cold floor. He took a deep breath, chest rattling, before he began to speak.

"I work long hours in Lady Jeon's household. I get up hours before the sun, and go to bed hours after it sets. Even if Ru brought back a chalice, I would be none the wiser to it."

"Did you hear any of the other omegas talk about it? Did they mention anything?"

Jimin thought of Jin, the kitchen servant who brought Hyewon her dishes on occasion, who had confided in Jimin that he had recently done something to get Ru and Leah back for all their teasing.

The former gisaeng shook his head firmly. "No. I never did hear anything of the sort, my lord," he declared.

Captain Joon smiled at Jimin, reassuring as he waved him off to the side. "Step away, Jimin. Thank you for your testimony."

Jimin flushed and ducked his head, obeying the alpha's command.

"The kitchen servant...call him forth," Lord Woo ordered.

Jin had been hidden in the crowd of faces to Jimin's right, and the sea parted as a guard escorted him forward. The omega's eyes seemed almost empty, the most expressionless Jimin had ever seen him, and his mouth opened and closed wordlessly, as if he were chanting a prayer of sorts.

"Servant Jin, an omega employed in the kitchens."

Jin made his way over on wobbly feet, and once he was where he needed to be, in front of the Bangtan nobles, he sank to his knees. When he remained silent, the guard nudged him with a boot. "Address them, omega," he commanded.

Jin's voice trembled as he spoke, calling each of them individually. "Young Mistress Min, Captain Joon, Lord Woo, Lord Jung, and Lord Jeon. Please excuse my actions."

"So he does have a tongue, eh?" Lord Woo chuckled.

"Recall the events of this morning," Captain Joon's gaze never left Jin. Jimin shivered at the look in his eyes. He'd seen that look before on many men, but to see it on gentle Captain Joon? It was worrying.

"I went to bring Young Mistress Hyewon her breakfast," Jin recited. "And I was going to pour her the wine she always liked to drink, but her chalice wasn't there. So I asked Young Mistress Hyewon where I could find it. She sent Ru to look for the chalice in its usual place, but Ru came back with nothing."

"Do you know where Hyewon keeps the chalice, Jin?" Captain Joon asked.

Jin shook his head. "I am not Hyewon's private servant, and so I am not privy to such information. It would be unwise if I were."

Jimin closed his eyes. *Jin, what are you doing?* He thought to himself, loud enough that he hoped somehow Jin would hear. *Are you mad?*

“And why would it be unwise?” the Min representative leaned forward.

“Because I was hired only two weeks ago, Young Mistress. I passed a background check, yes, but to become a personal servant, one needs a year of training at the least. I don’t have that.”

“What do you know of a personal servants’ requirements, if you’ve only been here two weeks?” the omega asked, frowning.

The corners of Jin’s lips quirked upwards. “I am a quick learner, Young Mistress Min. I pick up on these things well. It’s just...”

“Just what?”

“I wish I would have been questioned earlier. All of this....it’s a simple mistake.”

Jin wrung his hands before him, expression turning morose, and the table broke out into confused murmurs. Each of them stared, confused, and Jimin held his breath as Lord Jung jerked his head at the guard.

Just how would Jin explain a stolen chalice?

The guard moved forward, perhaps to intimidate the kitchen servant, but Jin only raised his head higher, gaze set and determined.

“Ru did not steal the chalice. If anything, she misplaced it,” he said.

“What do you mean?” Young Mistress Min frowned. “How would you know that?”

“Because I saw the chalice. It was under Young Mistress Hyewon’s bed,” Jin remarked.

Lord Jeon narrowed his eyes and leaned forward, while Lord Jung sputtered beside him.

“And you didn’t think to inform anyone of this?” Lord Jung asked, appaled. “Why didn’t you say anything before? We went through all of this trouble - “

“Confirm if what the servant says is true,” Captain Joon instructed, snapping a finger at one of the guards, who ran to do his bidding. His eyes still refused to leave Jin.

The throne room was quiet for the next few minutes, with the exception being the lords who whispered to each other in hostile tones. When the guard came back, he confirmed Jin’s words, and the servants who had been brought in to be questioned were promptly dismissed, Jimin and Jin included.

“Have the servant Ru freed in the morning,” they heard Lord Woo grumble loudly as they left, despite his granddaughter’s protests. “She is guilty of no crime.”

"Well, this was a waste of time," Lord Jung complained, glaring at both Lord Woo and Captain Joon in equal measure. "*Please* tell me we won't have to go through this again every time a servant breaks a dish or misplaces a rag."

The doors closed shut behind them before they could hear anyone answer him. Jimin glanced over at Jin, finding that the other omega had a wide, almost maniacal grin stretched across his face. He wondered what it meant, for Jin to be smiling so widely at his tormentor’s good fortune.

When they arrived at their room, it was suspiciously empty. Were the other omegas too scared to come to bed, or were they still being questioned? Jimin's hands shook as he stared at Jin, who was cool and composed and didn't seem to care at all. He felt a frantic worry pester him for some reason, though Jin sat before him now, healthy and safe. For Heaven's sake, the omega was rubbing his hands together in glee!

Jin grinned, oblivious to Jimin's mood. "Ru will be released tomorrow morning. She'll be interviewed some more, then taken to the baths and given a hot meal. I'd say her luck has turned around."

Jimin clenched his fists. "And the others? Where are they?"

"When Leah was taking notes for Lord Jung earlier today, she had problems with her ink. She'll be back in two days' time. The others? I don't know, nor do I care."

Jimin shook his head and joined Jin on the bed. "Was this the lesson you had planned for them? An elaborate set up like that? If anything, you brought attention to yourself. Just what were you thinking?"

"If anything, I've shown that the Bangtan rebels can be wrong. When word gets out that they almost executed an omega over a misplaced cup, can you imagine? It won't be good for their image. Ru, on the other hand..."

"I was only going to scare her a bit, at first," Jin explained, voice suddenly sounding faint. His face twisted into a frown. "I was hoping Hyewon would maybe call for the guards, or hit her a few times, and then I could bring out the cup from underneath the bed. I'd save her from an execution, and she'd owe me for that. But..."

"But what?" Jimin asked, grabbing onto Jin's forearms to steady himself. "Why would you go that far?"

"Hyewon mentioned something about a trial. She said there would be a trial before anything was decided, before Ru was killed."

"So you were curious? That's it? You brought that much attention to yourself, just so you could satisfy your curiosity?" Jimin's grip tightened, jostling the other omega's arms slightly. It was not good if a noble could place a name to a pretty face. Again, Jimin thought of Captain Joon, and the way he never seemed to look away from Jin.

Jin remained quiet, eerily so, and his eyes seemed very far away. When he spoke next, his voice sounded hundreds upon thousands of years older. "Do you know what happened in the imperialist court, to servants who misbehaved?"

Something cold washed over Jimin, and his collar felt tight around his neck, as if he was suffocating. He had heard stories, especially living in Adviser Paek's manor, of the things that the old king - Taehyung's father - had done to misbehaving servants.

"He would torture them first, to get all of the information out of them that he could. When the guards had cut deep enough and crushed enough to have finally broken them, the king would drag those servants - those traitors - before the entire court, and break them even more. He liked to play games with them sometimes. He'd have them hop on one foot or balance candlesticks on top of their heads. The lucky ones, they lasted minutes. The unlucky ones? They lasted days."

Jimin sucked in a deep breath, hoping to calm himself, but his chest only hurt even more. He

squeezed his eyes shut and tried not to picture the story that Jin was telling.

“Stop,” he begged, letting go of Jin to cover his ears. “Stop, I don’t want to hear - “

“There was one servant,” Jin admitted, voice hoarse. “A thirteen-year-old named Jiyeon. She was just a young girl, you see, and so she liked to gossip, but the king did not like what she was gossiping about. The king treated her like all of the rest. He dragged her before the court, with no one to defend her, with no fair trial to set her free, and ordered the Crown Prince to take responsibility. That is... *was* the sort of justice the king delivered.”

Jin’s voice cracked, and he paused, staring at his hands.

Jimin sniffled, holding back tears. “What are you getting at, Jin? What’s the point of this story?”

“A fair trial. I’ve never seen one before,” Jin admitted softly. “A part of me wanted to indulge in that. The other part? Well, I wanted to see the leaders of the rebels, the sheep who poisoned the lions’ well.”

Jimin jerked away, frightened, for he saw something strange in Jin’s eyes, a certain craze to them he’d seen only once before. When Jimin had thrown Taehyung’s ring back at him, when he’d spat his refusal to marry a penniless man, of how he’d never loved him at all, Taehyung’s dark eyes had lit up just like that.

Jin pressed on, not needing any assurance. It was almost as if he were speaking to himself. “I wanted to look in the faces of each person responsible for tearing down the Kim dynasty, for killing so many of my precious people. I needed to remember each and every single one.”

“Because those sheep? I’m going to throw them on the pyre and watch them fucking burn.”

Jimin took a deep breath, tears stinging his eyes. He tried to hold them back, but they fell anyway. In that moment, he was reminded of how weak he was, of how his helpless hands - which could not even pour poison in a cup - had grown used to brushing the hair of Taehyung’s killer everyday for a week. He remembered Madam Yerin’s bullying, which had caused him to throw away the only future he might have. He thought of the tattoo on his back, which branded him as nothing more than a slave, an evil, sinful creature of the night.

Jimin was tired of being afraid, and so he reached out slowly, carefully, towards Jin. Jin, who was not afraid of anything. His hand found Jin’s own, curling around it.

He did not doubt the other omega’s words for a moment, of what he had promised to do.

And a part of him, a dark part buried deep inside, wanted to watch it happen.

“Then I will help you.”

If Jimin could not take revenge for Taehyung, then perhaps Jin could do so in his place.

Chapter End Notes

the fates of both jin and jimin are intertwined - have been for a while - but jin is not the best influence on jimin :// a big hint for who bought jimin's freedom was in this chapter...the real question now is why....

the bangtan four are hiding namjoon's identity in order to protect him from any imperialist supporters (who are still causing a fuss and have the Qing government behind them)...that is why they hide it from the public.

Next Chapter: Jin confronts Yoongi before he leaves for his estate. Namjoon, in an attempt to forget his past, unknowingly crashes right into it.

i'm sorry for not responding to any of the comments on the last chapter!! each one of them was greatly appreciated. i've just had a bunch of stuff going on in my life right now and so i barely found any energy just to write...things will be much better once school is over with, i can promise you guys that! :)

Chance Encounters

Chapter Summary

Jin confronts Yoongi before he leaves for his estate. Namjoon, attempting to forget his past, unknowingly crashes right into it.

tw: violence - there is blood and a main character is injured - & refusing to eat

Chapter Notes



See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Yoongi woke to warmth all around him, nestled in the curve of Hoseok's arms. His limbs felt sore and heavy as he moved them, and he burrowed himself further in the blankets, tucked closer to Hoseok's side. A sensation grew in his chest, a low rumble of sorts, and Yoongi turned over, face pressed against his alpha's chest as he gave a few cautious sniffs.

He laid there, feeling more content than he had in weeks, until he realized what day it was. Yoongi

had to leave for his father's estate later today. He would not wake up in Hoseok's bed again until weeks - maybe even months - later. Only after his business back home was settled could Yoongi return to the palace. The rumbling of his chest stopped as a frown grew on his face, and he slowly threw an arm around Hoseok's side, almost possessively, near indignantly.

"You stopped purring."

Yoongi flushed, raising his eyes for a few seconds to meet Hoseok's searching gaze, before he lowered them quickly. He drew back his arm as if burned, covering his face. "How long have you been awake?" he asked, mortified.

"A while," Hoseok admitted, voice groggy but still full of cheer. Yoongi hated him for it.

"Embarrassing," Yoongi muttered. "You're embarrassing. So what, you were just watching me sleep?"

If Hoseok had been awake that meant he'd noticed Yoongi scenting the air, purring in contentment and shuffling closer to his side. Though Yoongi had known Hoseok for years, though they'd even consummated their relationship a few weeks ago, he was still shy in showing his affections.

"I wanted to watch you for a while, soak it all in."

Yoongi huffed, sending out a gentle nudge to try and escape Hoseok's embrace, but the alpha just wrapped his arms around him even tighter. "You're ridiculous," Yoongi sighed, though he leaned back into the embrace without anymore protests.

They lazed about for a few minutes more, basking in each others' presence, before Hoseok took a deep breath, nosing at Yoongi's ruffled hair. "I don't want you to go," he admitted. "You've only just come back to me. How am I supposed to let you leave now?"

"I wish I could stay, but there's work to be done. You know this."

Hoseok let out a snort. "Why do you need to show up at your father's estate to root out your uncle? I could send a hundred men to do the job for you."

He did not seem to understand what it meant, for an unmated omega lord to send a noble alpha's forces to do his dirty work. It just reinforced the idea that Yoongi was weak, that he had to rely on a big, strong alpha to get things done. What little support was left for the omega would be retracted at the first sign of weakness, especially during such volatile times as this.

"I need to send the right message," Yoongi explained. "My father's vassals will only follow me if they know I can lead. I have to prove myself worthy of their loyalty."

"They are fools," Hoseok said, voice low. "A bunch of wrinkled, musty fools stuck in the past. The old dynasty is dead. If they don't fall in line soon, the changes will sweep them away."

Yoongi reached a hand up to trace the slope of Hoseok's nose, thumb running across his cheek. "I know, darling," he murmured. "And yet I need them all the same. At least in the beginning."

Hoseok frowned and grabbed a hold of Yoongi's hip. "What if it takes too long? What if you go into heat, with no ally around to keep their puppets at bay?"

It would be too much of a coincidence, if his last memory of his father's estate and his future visit overlapped with a heat. Yoongi's uncle had triggered a heat in the hopes that he could mate the recently widowed heir, but those plans were ruined by Seokjin, who made sure Yoongi need never

fear a forced bonding with his uncle ever again. Now Yoongi would be returning home, and there would be no Seokjin to keep him safe from the young, dumb alphas his uncle sent his way.

The worry had crossed his mind once before, but only for a moment. His mother's magic thrummed through his veins, and the skills she had taught him would suffice for a situation such as that. If Yoongi wasn't worried, then there was no reason for Hoseok to be.

Yoongi raised a foot up to run it along Hoseok's calf. "If that happens, I'll hole up in my room and cast a charm to ward out alphas," he said, shrugging a shoulder.

"You wouldn't have to use your magic," Hoseok started, "if you'd let us mate."

There was a twinge of hurt in Hoseok's voice, the topic obviously a sore one. Hoseok would always ask, and yet Yoongi's answer always remained the same.

"It's not that I don't want to become mates, Hoseok," Yoongi started, sounding just as nervous as he felt. "You know that, right?"

The alpha let out a heavy sigh at his words.

"I know," Hoseok said softly. "We have to wait until your uncle is taken care of, until you can fully take the lordship as your own."

"It's not just that, though," Yoongi shook his head, chest aching. "Even if I take care of my uncle and come back, we have to wait. Namjoon's marriage has to be the first of the Bangtan Four, so that we can cement his position."

Hoseok sat up at this, eyes narrowed. "Please," he began, frowning. His voice took on an urgent tone. "Why are you so insistent on that? What you're proposing, what you want - you're not giving Namjoon any say in his own future."

They had had this fight many, many times before. Each and every time, it seemed they ran in circles - both were too stubborn, so neither gave in.

"He can't just do what he wants anymore," Yoongi argued. "Namjoon will be a king soon enough, and he'll have to fight a court that doubts his lineage. If he ties himself to the main Kim bloodline, his claim and that of his children will be indisputable."

"It's not right, Yoongi," Hoseok shook his head, voice low. "It's not right, and you know it. How would you feel if Namjoon made you marry someone you didn't love, didn't even know?"

"Namjoon would not dare command me," Yoongi hissed. "He is not my alpha."

"And yet he will be your king. Would you dare disobey your king?" Hoseok growled.

His words carried weight, and before Yoongi knew it, all of his irritation had vanished and been replaced with a weary resignation. The omega let out a long sigh, unable to meet Hoseok's eyes. "Namjoon knows what is expected of him," he grumbled. "He'll do what needs to be done for the good of the people."

"And this plan of yours is what needs to be done for the good of the people? Are you sure you're not just making a place at court for your dearest friend?"

Yoongi scowled. "I will not do with Seokjin as Lord Jeon suggested. And he's not my friend. It's just that there's enough blood on my hands already. I don't think I could bear to add more to it."

The words were nothing but truth, one that had never bothered Yoongi before, and yet why did admitting it now make his chest ache?

“And what if your plan doesn’t work out? Lord Jeon has already summoned one of his nieces to court in the hopes she might catch Namjoon’s eye. I’m sure that cousin of yours has similar aspirations.”

Yoongi’s lips thinned. “Lord Jeon can try all he likes. Namjoon is not the type of brainless alpha he can manipulate. And my cousin? I’m sure my aunt has prepared her for some seduction of sorts, but she knows better than to cross me. I’m leaving her in charge of internal affairs while I’m gone. If she reaches too high, Hoseok, then you have my permission to cut her down.”

“Internal affairs?” Hoseok snorted. “What does she know of running a palace? She’s never even lived in one before.”

“She knows my tastes and goals, and she’ll know the plans I have for this place,” Yoongi rose from their bed, covering himself with a thin robe.

Hoseok only raised an eyebrow, silent. The alpha did not understand that Yoongi’s cousin had an important role to play. The only reason that Yoongi could not trust Hoseok or even Namjoon for the task was because they were preoccupied. Namjoon was focused on moulding the Bangtan court, whereas Hoseok was doing what he could to unite their own military and the skeletal force of what was once the imperial army.

Yoongi needed someone on his side who could refurbish the palace as it had been, for the employment of servants to rise and said servants to be disciplined accordingly. The Min lord had enough to worry about in regards to his father’s estate and his uncle; he couldn’t afford to spare much thought for the palace schemes at this time.

The omega sat down in front of his dresser, catching sight of his pale face in the mirror. He reached for a set of cosmetics. If he was departing today, he’d have to look good for it. The court did love a show.

Hoseok came up behind him, face next to his own as he rested his chin on Yoongi’s shoulder. “You are smart, Yoongi. One of the smartest men I know. But I fear you’ve miscalculated.”

Yoongi stilled, brush in hand. “Oh?” he remarked coolly. “And just what have I miscalculated?”

His alpha pressed a chaste, gentle kiss to his shoulder. “What about love?”

“Love?” Yoongi nearly choked on the word, flushing.

“What if Namjoon falls in love with Lord Jeon’s niece, or your cousin, or even some other pretty noble they throw at him? What if he falls for the servant who shines his shoes?”

Yoongi narrowed his eyes. He did not agree with Hoseok’s reasoning, with the possibility that Namjoon may not go through with their plan upon finding someone else to mate. Namjoon was mature and responsible, strong-willed enough that he could fight the temptation of sweet necks and slick thighs.

“It’s fine if he fucks a maid or knots some noble’s daughter,” Yoongi answered in a clipped tone. “As long as he marries Seokjin first, I could care less.”

Hoseok snorted, mirth in his eyes. It was obvious he did not believe Yoongi for a second, as the omega had made clear many times his opinion on alphas who took more than one mate. While the

practice was typically frowned upon amongst the common folk, some nobles saw it as a symbol of status. The more mates an alpha could provide for, the richer he must be.

“And what of Seokjin? You would chain him to a lifetime of shame in the shadows?” Hoseok asked.

Yoongi lifted his chin, meeting Hoseok’s dark gaze in the reflection of the mirror. “You have never met Seokjin, so you would not know. There exists no shadow that can cover him.”

Hoseok raised a hand to Yoongi’s neck, trailing over his scent gland. Perhaps he imagined a bite mark there, claiming Yoongi as his own. “You speak so highly of him, yet you still deny you are friends,” he commented.

“Enough of this,” Yoongi shook his head, pushing Hoseok’s hand away. “I need to dress and gather my things. I have stops to make before I leave the capital.”

Hoseok let the matter drop with a resigned sigh, though it must have been because he knew they would pick up this similar song and dance once Yoongi came back. It would do them no good to spend their last few hours together arguing.

The alpha slowly began to gather Yoongi’s things, settling them back in chests and drawers as the omega readied his face and hair. “Are you stopping at the market then?” Hoseok asked.

Yoongi fingered the strands of hair along the nape of his neck. His hair was getting longer; he’d need to cut it soon. Yoongi had never favored the long hair that most omegas commonly wore, and trying to style hair of such a length after all this time was asking too much. He settled for placing a pretty pin behind his right ear.

“Yes,” he lied. “I want to bring my cousins a few gifts from the capital. Perhaps it will remind them how out of reach my position is.”

“Haughty little thing, aren’t you?” Hoseok chuckled and reached over, threading his fingers through Yoongi’s own. He brushed his thumb over the gold ring there and lifted it up for a chaste kiss. “I’ll miss you, each and every day. So you must come back to me as quick as you can. I might die from heartbreak otherwise.”

Yoongi rolled his eyes, though he felt his heart soar. He squeezed Hoseok’s hand in his own. “Don’t you know, my dear?” he murmured. “If you die, I’ll follow. I won’t have any other besides you.”

Falcons mate for life after all.

Yoongi left with much fanfare and procession, a string of carts and servants behind him. Both Hoseok and Namjoon made time to see him off, and even Lord Jeon made an appearance, though Yoongi wished he wouldn’t have. As soon as Yoongi and his attendants were off palace grounds, the omega stopped at a nearby shop and told his servants to wait outside. Yoongi used the opportunity to quickly cloak himself with a worn, dirtied cloak, rubbing the paints off of his face and tousling his hair.

He darted through the streets and ducked behind buildings, doing whatever he could to conceal himself from any rebel soldiers or pickpockets who might recognize him as Lord Min. He walked quickly, but not fast enough to draw attention. At one busy marketplace, he recognized a few palace servants buying groceries.

Yoongi did not tell his alpha that he was visiting the less than savory parts of the capital, did not dare to utter the entire truth: that Yoongi was to meet with one of Adviser Paek's former servants, a man who had been forced out of the palace nearly twenty-three years ago.

There were questions Yoongi had in regards to the Kim bloodline, to the role his own mother had to play with it, and the madness that may one day eat at Namjoon's own mind. There was one man who had been witness to it all - Adviser Paek. He'd been around for not only the queen's death, but the subsequent deterioration of the king's sanity. Yoongi hoped that Adviser Paek's household would hold the answers he sought. When he visited Paek's estate, he only found more questions waiting for him, as many of the documents were written in a code of sorts, scrambled and fixed with certain symbols or clever sayings. It went without saying that Paek could not afford for anyone to stumble upon his dealings, whatever they may be.

Yoongi hoped that the contact he would meet might be able to decipher the code. After getting the man's address from the palace records, the omega had set up a meeting in an old, rundown tavern amidst the hustle and bustle of the capital streets. As Yoongi arrived at the scene, he realized the tavern was a little worse off than he'd expected. Some of its windows were boarded up with shabby wood, and the place was covered in every kind of dirt and grime imaginable.

One of the employees showed him to a shadowed table in the corner at his request. Yoongi covered his nose with his cowl, dusting off his seat before he sat down. A gaudy gisaeng near the bar laughed at something the men around her were saying, and the drunken oafs at the card table looked like they were about ready to throw fists when one was discovered to have been cheating.

Yoongi looked around carefully for the contact he was supposed to meet, scanning each and every face for someone or something familiar. He had nothing to go off of in regards to the old servant's identity. The omega only knew that he should look for a figure with a green scarf. Though they were supposed to meet at this time, Yoongi saw no one who matched the description.

Yoongi was so caught up in his people watching that he did not notice the other patron until they sat down before him, cloaked in a thin, patchy garment similar to his own. For some reason, Yoongi knew that this was not the man with the green scarf he sought. They sat at an angle so that only their profile would have been if it weren't for the hood. Yoongi curled his fingers around the knife along his belt, ready for a fight, nostrils flaring -

His eyes widened. Yoongi knew that scent. His fingers froze, going slack as his hand fell to his side. All the omega could do was simply stare, in both disbelief and relief.

"Seokjin?" he croaked.

The former Crown Prince laughed, so high-pitched and airy it sounded like that of tinkling bells. "My dear Lord Min," he purred. "What a coincidence it is, to meet you in a place such as this. "

Yoongi had forgotten.

Perhaps he'd been arrogant and proud, or perhaps even too frightened and guilty to dwell on it. He'd made plans for what would come after the dust settled, and yet now that he was here, he realized he didn't quite know what he should say to the lost prince.

Had he thought conversation would come easy between them, as it had so often in the past?

Yoongi was a fool, one who'd forgotten the most important thing. Prince Seokjin was the heir to a dynasty of fire and blood lust, driven by madness and greed.

And Yoongi was responsible for ruining him.

He'd be lying if he said he weren't afraid.

Especially as one half of Seokjin's face peeked out from behind his hood, so very gaunt and pale, just like that of a spirit. His plush lips were now dry and cracked, but he still found the energy to smile, wide and vicious.

"Cat got your tongue?" Seokjin asked, voice smooth like silk. He leaned forward. "Come now, Lord Min! We're friends, are we not? And friends *talk*."

Yoongi sucked in a deep breath as he felt something sharp prod against his outer thigh thigh. A warning.

"What do you want to talk about, Seokjin?" Yoongi asked carefully.

"About you, of course!" Seokjin remarked. "I have to wonder, how long did you hold that rebel knife behind my back before you finally decided to plunge it in?"

Yoongi looked around at the patrons milling around. None of them seemed to be interested in the conversation between the two omegas. Yoongi lowered his voice. "Are you sure this is the right place - "

"It is the only place," the former prince interrupted. "Now speak."

Yoongi swallowed. There was no need to obey Seokjin, but a part of him felt as if he needed to explain himself. "Have you ever had to hear the screams of those starving in the streets? To look upon their sunken, quivering bodies? Because I have."

The omega wet his lips. "When I was younger, my father took me to a village that had had their coffers confiscated by royal decree. He pointed at the teenagers who looked no bigger than little children, and he told me to never forget. It was the king who had done this to them. The mad king, along with all the advisers and nobles who turned a blind eye, were responsible for such horror."

Seokjin was unimpressed with this story. He waved a hand. "I knew what my father was capable of - more so than anyone else! If you had wanted to kill him so badly, I would have gladly brandished the blade."

Or so he claimed. Yoongi was reluctant to believe him, scowling. "Things needed to change quickly, and you weren't doing anything. The Bangtan Four simply took matters into their own hands. It's thanks to us that the people sleep with full bellies."

The half of Seokjin's face that was visible remained blank. "So you slaughtered hundreds for the greater good. That is your explanation for why my people died."

Yoongi shifted, uncomfortable but mindful of the glass poking his thigh. "Many died quickly," he said for his own sake, his own guilt. "Painlessly."

"Many, but not all," Seokjin's eye narrowed. "Did you mean for me to go into heat? Was it an aphrodisiac of sorts you'd been putting into my tea?"

Yoongi shook his head. "No," he insisted, voice strained. "That was never part of the plan. You must believe me when I say this: I would never make you, of all people, go through something like that, Seokjin."

The former prince took a deep breath, most likely composing himself. Yoongi fiddled with his hands, drumming them along the top of their table. Seokjin was smart enough to know that Yoongi would never willingly cause him harm, wasn't he?

Perhaps the Uprising has driven him mad, Yoongi thought, if only for a moment.

When Seokjin spoke again, it was with a sort of morose tenderness to his voice. "Regardless of your intentions, Yoongi, you have done just that."

One hand came up from under the table to join the other, both trembling as they came to grip the edges of his hood, and Seokjin turned as he brought it down, exposing his visage for Yoongi to see in the dim tavern light. "Do you see now, how you have ruined me?"

Yoongi sucked in a deep breath, and he had to shut his eyes to the sight, for fear they would fill with tears. "Seokjin," he began, voice wavering. The Min lord had to pause, unsure of how to continue. Because what did he say to the once handsome prince whose face had been ravaged by time and terror?

He felt Seokjin's horror, his hatred and disgust - all of it rolled over him, so heavy and thick that Yoongi almost began to croon in comfort. The anger and loathing were not aimed at Yoongi, despite what he might have believed at first. No, they were reserved for none other than Seokjin himself.

"I suppose you did me a favor. No one will want to marry me now. Not for my lands or title, not even for my face," Seokjin mused softly.

"Seokjin. Seokjin, that's not true," Yoongi urged, reaching forward for one of the other omega's hands.

Seokjin drew away, lips twisting into a snarl. "Stop it! I don't need your pity. I don't want it, not from you of all people."

"Don't tell me you blame me for your face," Yoongi said in disbelief. His hand fell limp on the table, and he felt a sort of bitterness spike inside of him. "I had no part in butchering it or starting your heat. It was a coincidence. A horrible, awful coincidence."

"Fine, then. Tell me - look me in the eyes and say it, that the suppressants in my tea weren't messed with," Seokjin lifted his chin, as proud and defiant as ever.

Yoongi faltered. "It was only for a few days. Not even a week. That shouldn't have been long enough to start a heat," he reasoned, mostly to himself.

"I've been taking suppressants every day without fail for *years*. It makes sense that stopping altogether would kick start my cycle. Shouldn't you have known something like that?"

Perhaps the former prince was right. Perhaps Yoongi should have known better.

And yet -

His mother had said otherwise. Even if Yoongi questioned it, if he second-guessed tampering with Seokjin's tea, his mother's expert opinion would have quelled his fears. Yoongi shook his head. There were other things he needed to speak with Seokjin about, certain things he needed to convince him of. He couldn't dwell on something as flimsy as this suspicion. He didn't want to dwell on it, to realize that he was wrong or that his mother had lied.

"That was your choice to take suppressants for that long!" he snapped, feeling distressed and horribly guilty. "Not mine!"

As soon as he said this, he wished he could take it back. Yoongi wanted the thick smoke of guilt that choked him to go away, to shove whatever he felt at Seokjin. He was just upset, eager to hurt Seokjin in the way that he was hurting, which was rather ridiculous - hadn't Seokjin been hurt enough, already?

"My choice?" Seokjin's voice came out strangled, disbelieving.

Yoongi saw it in the way Seokjin tensed, face muscles tightening as he closed himself off, and an eerie silence fell between them. Seokjin took a deep, shuddering breath and they merely stared at each other. Finally, Seokjin relaxed. He rolled his shoulders and lowered his eyes. Yoongi followed the other omega's gaze down to where it rested on Yoongi's hands. Yoongi clenched them unconsciously at the attention, but did not move them.

"Do you still play, Lord Min?" Seokjin asked, his eyes appearing very, very empty. The question seemed so very random, throwing Yoongi off guard. He did not understand what the former prince was getting at, but he gave a short nod anyways.

"You still pluck out those pretty tunes with your pretty fingers, hmm?" Seokjin mused.

Yoongi should not have left his hands on the table. Perhaps it was his own fault because he had. Seokjin held his wrist down with one hand, then brought the other up from under the table to jerk it down in a fluid arc. Yoongi saw the sticky mess of it before he felt it, blood running over his hand and onto the table as he twitched, trying to jerk away. He heard a funny crunch, realizing that Seokjin had twisted the glass as it stayed embedded in his hand. The pain came suddenly, all at once, and Yoongi squealed, a sound so very pitiful and uncharacteristic that a mocking, gleeful grin grew across Seokjin's face.

There were no words to truly discover how excruciating it felt, to have the nerves and bones in his hand ripped apart by a jagged piece of glass. Yoongi was so focused on blocking out the pain, on figuring out how to get rid of it, that he did not yell for help of any kind or summon his magic.

The hand holding his down came up to grab Yoongi's shoulder, bringing him closer and unable to rip free. Seokjin's ghoulish smile whispered against the shell of Yoongi's ear. "Good luck playing those pretty songs now, Lord Min. You will most certainly need it."

And he was gone.

Once Yoongi felt the prince's presence leave him, he found his voice. "Help," he started, a strained croak. He brought his punctured hand to his chest, glass and all. "Help!"

One of the servers heeded his call, shrieking once she saw the messy blood all over the table and his clothes. She seemed so surprised at the sight, dabbing at his wound and calling for more help from other unattentive employees. Yoongi briefly wondered if no one else had witnessed Seokjin's act of vengeance, if the rest of the world had stood still in that moment, an offering from the gods who paid the Min heir his due.

It wasn't enough, Yoongi thought miserably, shivering. It will never be enough.

Not for Seokjin, who had lost everything.

"Yoongi sent a letter," was the first thing out of Hoseok's mouth when he entered Namjoon's

office after dinner. “Have you read it?”

Namjoon, who was in the middle of writing letters of his own, paused. “No,” he admitted. “When did it come?”

Hoseok shifted from one foot to the other. “This afternoon. I just - I wondered if you had understood what he meant, about the attack and everything.”

Yoongi’s entourage had been attacked by a group of bandits before they had barely left the capital. Yoongi himself suffered an injury to his hand, but he insisted it was nothing more than a minor scratch. They’d sent a doctor out to tend to him, and the omega refused to come back to the palace for rest in favor of pressing on.

“You’re worried. Don’t be,” Namjoon assured his friend. “Yoongi’s not an idiot. If the wound was that bad, he’d have come back in a heartbeat. Besides, this whole thing is important to him. He knows it won’t look good if he arrives at his father’s estate in a weak state.”

Hoseok frowned, crossing his arms over his chest. He muttered something suspiciously like, “It’s my job to worry.”

“Did he say anything about Young Mistress Min in his letter?” Namjoon asked, changing the topic.

Yoongi had placed his cousin in charge of internal affairs, which included the upkeep of the palace. Namjoon was curious as to what changes she would try to implement in Yoongi’s stead, if she tried any at all.

“Not a word,” Hoseok shrugged his shoulders. “Should he have?”

Namjoon shook his head. “It’s not important. I was just curious about the relics we had left, what he’d want her to do with them.”

There were still rooms full of age old Kim dynasty fixtures, from jewelry to dressers to tapestries. Namjoon had specialists seeing to the restoration of many of them, which were now kept under safe lock and key, but the ones long overdue for fixing had been either sold or simply burned.

Hoseok snapped his fingers suddenly. “Aha! Speaking of old relics!”

The general fumbled with something inside his pockets. Namjoon’s left eye twitched at what the general pulled out, but he steeled his expression into something unbothered.

“Where did you get this?” he asked, voice firm.

Hoseok dangled the familiar white collar in front of him. The ribbon along the edges was frayed and the silver fixings were dull, assuring Namjoon of how old the necklace truly was.

“One of my servants found it in Prince Seokjin’s room, I believe. Under his bed.”

Namjoon felt his chest ache at the thought of the Crown Prince guarding his engagement collar so closely. Before he knew it, he was reaching out to curl his fingers around the collar, smoothing over the silky ribbon. He didn’t know what to say, at a loss for words.

“Do you remember much of him?” Hoseok prodded gently, eyes sympathetic.

Namjoon felt a part of him soften. He remembered a little boy dressed in bright red and gold, holding out his hand for Namjoon to catch up. He had a gentle face, a haughty voice, but Namjoon

remembered nothing else. It was Prince Seokjin's mother who had left the greatest impression on young Namjoon, the bedridden queen that spoke to his own mother for hours during their weekly "tea parties".

Queen Sumi was beautiful in her fragility, skin so pale and thin it seemed as if she were made of crumpled paper. And yet she was dangerous, the infamous consort who'd scorched each and every womb in her husband's harem so that she could keep her own son safe. She'd smelled like ash and flowers, a sickly poison hiding beneath her veins, and the mark on her neck was swollen and infected, at times dripping with puss. Her large, brown eyes could pick apart any man or beast, scouring for threats or weaknesses. The queen would always beckon Namjoon closer, cooing at him as she poked the dimples in his cheeks, and smile.

She looked kinder when she smiled.

"Little Chickling," she murmured. "You'll grow up to be big and strong. A worthy alpha to the Kim name. You'll take care of my foolish child, won't you?"

Namjoon had nodded his head earnestly, unaware of what she truly meant. He remained clueless and ignorant, even when his own mother placed the collar in his hands a week later, some shaman chanting words over Namjoon and Seokjin's joined hands. Queen Sumi had known her son would present as a dud, even when the shamans and physicians swore he was an alpha. She'd engaged said son to Namjoon, a distant Kim cousin on her grandfather's side, if only to cement her heir's claim.

Perhaps it was a good thing the alpha queen had died, so she did not now have to witness her efforts being undermined by the very same boy she'd hoped to mould into her son's protector.

The engagement - which was supposed to protect Prince Seokjin's claim, to assure the court that he had a stable alpha's presence by his side - had dissolved many, many nights ago, when Namjoon's heart ceased its beating.

Till death do us part, the two children had repeated, sweaty fingers locked tight together.

And it was.

Nothing remained of the fragile bond they might have had, nothing that Namjoon knew of. Everything had been lost to the fire. Namjoon, his family, the letters, and what he thought was the engagement collar. Namjoon now held it in his hands, almost in awe that his former fiancée had kept it so near and dear.

Prince Seokjin was only a child, he had to remind himself. *He knew nothing of what his parents had planned.*

Hoseok cleared his throat.

Namjoon blinked and set the collar down. The palms of his hands burned at the memories, scars itching with irritation. "No," he answered finally. "We were only children. What's there to remember?"

"I wondered if he was anything like the rumors say he is," Hoseok mused. He reached over to pick up the collar once more. "They say he's frigid. Heartless. Is there any truth to that?"

Namjoon shifted in his seat. He'd heard rumors much the same, of Prince Seokjin beheading young maids, whipping court ladies and lords who angered him, and stringing up his bastard brother's dead whores for all to see. Rumors remained nothing more than rumors, and yet Namjoon

could concede that there may be truth to them.

Prince Seokjin must have been called the Ice Prince for a reason.

“I don’t know,” Namjoon said honestly, frowning. “He was a well-behaved child. Maybe more bossy than most, but nothing abnormal.”

He shuffled some of the papers on his desk. All of them were reports of possible sightings regarding the Crown Prince, and all of them had been proven false. It seemed as if Yoongi had been right to send Jeongguk on a special mission for this task. If there was anyone who could sniff out Prince Seokjin, it would be Jeongguk.

“When I meet him, I will know,” the captain said simply. “Whether he’s the heartless killer his enemies say he is, or the dutiful son his supporters swear him to be.”

Namjoon had always been a good judge of character. Yoongi had jokingly referred to it as a gift of sorts, the ability to read others’ hearts and minds with a simple glance. Namjoon only rolled his eyes at his friend’s teasing. The only supernatural thing about him had been brought on by Yoongi’s mother, the witch who’d breathed life back into his charred lungs.

“And if he *is* a heartless killer,” Hoseok murmured, setting the collar back on the desk cautiously. He sounded worried. “Will you be able to chain yourself to that man for the rest of your life? To share a bed with him? Break your bread together and raise his sons?”

They will be my sons, too, Namjoon thought, but did not say.

“I’ll do what my role requires of me,” Namjoon intoned. “As all good kings must.”

Even if that meant crushing the seeds of doubt in his heart, watered by a pull towards the stranger that had piqued his interest.

A few days passed after Seokjin’s chance encounter with Yoongi. The servant had been buying groceries with Suran at the market when he happened to see the Min lord stumbling about in disguise, and without a second thought, Seokjin abandoned his fellow servants as he followed the omega to a familiar tavern.

Seokjin, though he had certainly dreamed of such a bloody affair, hadn’t planned on hurting Yoongi at all. He’d only wanted to speak with him, but Yoongi had been so infuriating, sitting there with his pretty face and pretty love bites, radiating the utmost happiness. Seokjin couldn’t *not* stab him for it.

Afterwards, Seokjin had disappeared to the crowds, hoping to find a bath of some sorts so he might wash the blood from his hands.

Suran found him first. She nearly dropped the basket of vegetables she was holding, mouth falling open in shock. Seokjin had shrugged his shoulders, unsure of how to explain himself, when Suran steeled her expression into something blank. The beta urged him behind a building and set her basket to the side as she ripped at the hem of her skirt.

“Here,” she took his hands in her own, scrubbing the blood from his hands quickly. “Gods, you smell awful! What happened?”

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you,” Seokjin remarked.

Suran paused, raising an eyebrow. “Hmph. Fine. Be that way.”

She resumed her scrubbing and eventually dropped the dirtied cloth to the side, then looked at Seokjin’s clothes helplessly. “Gods, you’ve made a mess. There’s blood on your tunic, too! How are we supposed to explain that?”

“If anyone asks questions, I’ll say I was attacked,” Seokjin shrugged his shoulders. “It wouldn’t be the first time.”

“And if they want to do an examination?” Suran crossed her arms over her chest. “How will you explain that you escaped the encounter unscathed?”

Seokjin tilted his head to the side. “You covered for me when I wandered off, didn’t you,” he mused.

“Of course I did!” Suran scoffed. “So it won’t look good if you come back a right mess!”

“Why?” Seokjin asked. *Why did you cover for someone like me, who is cold and rude and terribly unforgiving?*

Suran paused and looked up at Seokjin, squinting in confusion. “Because we’re friends,” she said simply.

Friends. Had Seokjin ever had a friend before? No. The closest thing had been Taehyung, and even then it was usually Seokjin taking care of his younger brother. No one worried over Seokjin. No one took care of him. Not until now, when he’d become the lowest of the low, relegated to nothing more than a dishwasher. As he stared off into space, Suran touched his marred cheek, asking if he was alright in a voice uncharacteristically gentle.

He nodded, unable to form words for a moment.

“I see,” he finally said. “I see.”

When they regrouped with the other servants, many of them hardly noticed. The majority were betas with dull senses and even duller minds. They made it back to the palace with only a few curious looks, and Seokjin washed up in the baths before he could receive too many stares.

Seokjin had not gained as many answers from Yoongi as he would have liked, but he’d discovered something else perhaps far more important.

Throughout the next few days, he felt himself grow weary, worn out by the hustle and bustle of his work. Seokjin could barely keep his eyes open as he scrubbed the stains from plates and teacups, nearly falling face first into the basin of soapy water. He caught himself with his elbows, though water sloshed over the basin sides, bringing attention to his predicament.

“Do you need to lie down, Jin?” Suran asked, frowning.

“I’m fine,” Seokjin insisted, though it came out slurred.

“If you’re sick, you need to go back to your quarters,” another kitchen hand who was passing by advised. “We don’t want to catch anything.”

Seokjin glared weakly as the other disappeared, but Suran sighed and shook her head. “He’s right,” the girl admitted. “You need rest. If you’re sick, you’ll just make things harder for us.”

“I need to work,” Seokjin said through gritted teeth. If he took leave so soon after being hired, Maria may be quick to fire him, especially if she thought he was sick. He couldn’t allow that to happen. Not now anyways. There were whispers among the servants that Young Mistress Min would soon take the reins from Maria and implement harsh changes in regards to work ethic.

Besides, Seokjin knew without a doubt this wasn’t contagious. The growling of his stomach was what plagued him, restless as it gnawed at his insides. The only reprieve for this illness was impossible, something he could not stand to endure. If he continued to work, if he ignored it just a little longer, the hunger would go away soon. A part of him hoped that the curves he had gained would fade, leaving him as lanky and lithe as he once had been, but with Seokjin’s luck, the softness of his body would somehow stay.

Suran forced him to partake of some leftover soup, threatening she’d speak to Maria regarding his bad eating habits if he did not. Seokjin begrudgingly swallowed every last spoonful of the chunky, lukewarm stuff, struggling to keep it down, though his hungry stomach nearly wept in joy as it welcomed what little it could get.

It felt wrong of him to eat such slop, and he found himself on edge for the rest of the night and into the morning, worried that he might collapse any second from some sort of poison. His fears were heightened whenever he found himself more sluggish than he had been the day before, and his mind leapt towards all the different possibilities. Paralysis or sleep? Death or injury? If he truly had been poisoned, then was there a chance it might trigger a heat?

Impossible, Seokjin thought. *How can that be, when I have yet to bleed from the last one?*

It would be terribly cruel, for all his efforts to stop any future heats to be in vain, and yet it would be a fitting arc for the great tragedy that was Seokjin’s life. As he went about his morning duties, he had to force the worries from his head, lest he go mad from them.

The omega’s predicament reached its climax after he’d taken the breakfast dishes to Lord Woo’s nephew, a greasy alpha with wandering eyes. Seokjin made it back out into the hallway when he collapsed, body unable to keep up with the demands of the mind. His breathing felt short and cold all of a sudden, and he could not move, limbs so infuriating weak and brittle. He merely sat there, at a loss for how to proceed.

Several minutes passed. Seokjin was alone in the hallway, not a creature in sight, and he felt his breathing grow weaker, his eyelids more heavy as they fluttered shut. A haze clouded his senses, and suddenly there were noises calling out to him - memories and thoughts and nightmares. He dimly thought he saw the demon from his dreams before him, its fiery eyes flaring as a grin split its raw, fleshy lips open.

Seokjin reached a hand up and to his surprise, the demon mirrored his movements. *You are changing*, the thing crooned out to him. One of its claws dragged a line down its face, splitting its cheek open in a similar fashion. *Soon we will be one, you and I.*

He started to sink against his will, the darkness too heavy and great for him to fight. Would it be so bad, to simply give up here and now? Even though he’d come this far? A part of him knew it was wrong and weak of him to even considerate, and he was moments away from forcing his eyes open, from chasing away the doubts that clung tight to his heart.

But then there was a voice that broke through the haze , a deep, gentle voice that he somehow recognized which asked -

“Are you okay?”

Seokjin's hands twitched once before he lowered them, eyes opening to meet the gaze of none other than Captain Joon himself. The omega let out a strangled sound, shocked more than anything else. "What are you doing here?" he demanded immediately, disregarding the alpha's question and even propriety itself with his informal tone.

Captain Joon raised an eyebrow, amused. "I live here?"

Of course, Seokjin thought, grimacing at his slip up. It wasn't that much of a stretch for one of the Bangtan Four's captains to call the palace home now. He had even seen the captain at the trial, so he should've expected he would run into him again. Seokjin had just been thrown off by the alpha's sudden appearance, as well as unsettled by his concern.

Seokjin lowered his gaze quickly, murmuring an apology as he ducked his head.

Raise your eyes, he felt something in him growl. *You bow for no one*.

And yet he bowed all the same, too weak to do anything else but lean forward.

"Forgive me, my lord," Seokjin simpered. "I forget myself."

Captain Joon made a noise of distress. "There's no need for any of that, er...uh, Jin? Are you okay, though?"

Concern for some random servant - an omega at that! If Seokjin had the strength to, he would've laughed. "I'm fine," he murmured instead. "Really. I am."

He wished that Joon would leave, if only so he could make an attempt to stand. Seokjin didn't want the alpha to see him embarrass himself on unsteady legs, unsure if he could even stand; his pride could most certainly not handle it.

But it was as if Captain Joon read Seokjin's mind, because the next words out of the rebel's mouth were, "Then won't you stand? If you're fine, you should be able to."

Something ugly made its way across Seokjin's face, his mind and body too slow for him to stop it. "I will when you leave," Seokjin muttered waspishly. "A servant such as myself should not dare to stand in your presence."

Captain Joon did not respond at first, completely silent. Seokjin, despite his voice of reason telling him to keep his head down, raised his gaze, and the look on Joon's face had his breath catching in his throat. The captain was displeased with his answer, eyes dark and stormy as he scowled.

"Was I not responsible for making you a servant, Jin? I can take that away easily if you don't stand," the alpha commanded, words bearing such heavy weight to them that they seemed like an *order*.

Except Seokjin's body did not spontaneously react. He did not stand in response to some sort of instinct in his body, commanding him to follow the words of the alpha before him. Instead, Seokjin remained splayed on the velvet rugs of the halls, leaning a shoulder against the wall for support. The omega swallowed and admitted in a small, quiet voice, "I cannot."

"Pardon?"

"I cannot," Seokjin snapped, louder this time. He felt his eyes sting, body shaking with a growing rage. "There. Is that what you wanted to hear?"

Captain Joon's scowl lost its edge, face softening, and he moved forward, crouching so he was eye-level with Seokjin. "I knew something was wrong. What happened?" he asked, voice gentle.

"Nothing that concerns you," Seokjin grimaced, dull ache growing behind his eyes.

Joon leaned in suddenly, scenting the air as if searching for something in particular. "Did someone attack you? Was it Lord Woo's nephew?" he inquired anxiously, jerking his head in the direction of the room Seokjin had just exited.

Seokjin remained silent, cheeks flushed at the close proximity to this strange, annoying alpha. He raised one shoulder half-heartedly.

"Tell me, and I'll see your justice paid," Joon growled, eyes flashing. "I promised you safety, did I not?"

Seokjin felt himself shiver. He did not understand, mind hazy and dull. What was it that Captain Joon really wanted, concerning himself with a broken, scarred omega such as Seokjin? The ache grew behind his eyes, pounding in his head louder and louder. Seokjin drew away from Captain Joon, shifting to the other side, but he made the mistake of taking a deep breath, of scenting the air just as Joon had.

It was too much.

"Jin?" the alpha prodded once more, as the hunger in Seokjin's stomach grew too great to bear, as the omega's eyes rolled to the back of his head, his most coherent thought being that Captain Joon smelled so very familiar.

Smoke, Seokjin realized, for some reason feeling pleased and warm. *He smells like smoke and dying embers, the burning and crackling of pine trees.*

He smells like...

Seokjin, even with a muddled mind, didn't dare to complete that thought.

Chapter End Notes

so airplane pt. 2...the namjin jumped out and i am deceased :')

what are your favorite tracks from ly:tear? i love fake love, magic shop, and anpanman sooooo much. i've been streaming the album nonstop since the release lol ALSO i managed to get BTS CONCERT TICKETS SO THAT HAPPENED!!!!

i've posted the first chapter of the taekook side story if you wanna go check that out, but the next chapter will only come after i get to a certain point in this fic!! as always, pls leave kudos or comments if you liked. also follow me on twitter for fic updates and info!

EDIT: i had an existential crisis a few days ago and came /this/ close to discontinuing this fic (i even had the author's note written up in the next chapter and everything lol)!! but then i calmed down and received one (1) comment which just brought back all of my love for bts and fanfiction :)

Beginnings

Chapter Summary

A weakness in the Bangtan Four allows Seokjin to plan his next step.

Chapter Notes

sorry this is so late! i've been super busy with work, then i visited NYC for vacation this past week....i made sure to get this out before the end of june tho!! next chapter should hopefully come soon.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Seokjin woke to the low murmur of voices surrounding him, something soft and unfamiliar beneath his tired, aching body. He knew he was in a bed, one more comfortable than any he'd slept in as of late. He almost didn't want to get up.

Then he heard Captain Joon's voice, and every single muscle in his body tensed up. What was he doing in a bed such as this, especially one in the same room as a strange alpha?

"Yes, I'll make sure," Captain Joon murmured.

The door closed, and Seokjin sat up, taking in his surroundings. The room was rather plain, lined with bookshelves full of scrolls or tomes of all kinds. The entire room reeked of the alpha, that same smoky scent that Seokjin knew from somewhere long ago. The former prince tried very hard not to breathe through his nose. Captain Joon had his hand on the door, back turned.

There was a table beside the bed. It was covered in colorful dishes of all kinds - fresh, steaming ones at that - but Seokjin only spared them a glance. His eyes zeroed in on something silver, but he knew it would take too long to snatch it. Seokjin drew a long, shaky breath before he decided to speak.

"What's all of this?" he asked calmly, voice loud and clear. Seokjin felt anything but calm.

Captain Joon turned around, eyes wide and brows raised. "You're awake already?"

He still wore his thick scarf; Seokjin was starting to think that it was a permanent part of him. The alpha looked rather awkward as he stood there, like he didn't know what to do or say. It made Seokjin feel daring, and a little more like the prince he used to be.

"Why wouldn't I be?" Seokjin drawled.

The alpha fiddled with his gloves. "The doctor said it could take an hour or so before you woke up. You pushed your body to the limit."

The last time a doctor had examined Seokjin, it ended badly. The omega thought of his back, and he rose a hand to his shoulder. Seokjin vainly tried to recall if he'd felt anyone remove his clothes,

if anyone could have looked at his mark. He'd been out cold, though, and didn't remember a thing. Who knows what they had done since he'd fainted?

"Don't worry," Joon assured him, as if reading his thoughts. "We didn't undress you. That would be...improper."

His cheeks were rather pink.

Perhaps it was his embarrassment that made Seokjin trust his words. If this alpha could hardly even speak of undressing an omega without getting flustered, there was no way he'd be able to look at an undressed omega. Besides, if they'd seen his mark he would've been placed in chains, not treated to the comfort of a proper bed. Seokjin found himself relaxing, albeit slightly. He waved a hand, gesturing to the room.

"What's all of this about?" Seokjin questioned.

"You fainted," Joon said simply.

Seokjin gave him a look. "I know that," he said impatiently. "I suppose the better question is: where am I?"

"My quarters," the alpha's cheeks turned even redder. Seokjin made a face at the implication behind that. Captain Joon made wild motions with his hands, shaking his head. "Please, don't get the wrong idea! I only brought you here so that...there would not be so many questions."

"Questions," Seokjin started. "You were worried about questions because?"

"I did not think it would be good for you," Joon reasoned, "if Maria knew you were starving yourself."

Seokjin raised his gaze to meet Joon's own. The alpha's eyes were like liquid gold. "I'm not starving myself," Seokjin lied. "That doesn't make any sense. I love food! I would never -"

"Don't lie to me," the captain cut him off. His voice carried weight again, just as it had in the hallway. For some reason, Seokjin found himself listening. "When I saw you in the courtroom, I had wondered why you looked so thin. I thought perhaps it was the workload at fault, but according to the doctor, the fault lies with you."

A part of Seokjin wanted to lash out. What business was it of this alpha, whether Seokjin ate properly or not? Who was he to act like he cared, when he knew nothing at all? Another part of him felt timid, and something ugly curled in Seokjin's heart, running up and down his body. He wanted the ground to swallow him whole, to escape from Captain Joon's judging eyes. All he could do was look away, ashamed.

"Why?" the alpha asked.

It was hard to put into words. Seokjin could not eat the scraps from the rebels, the rotting leftovers set out for him. It was partly because the food had belonged to them. How could Seokjin consume what they refused? The paranoia was another factor. He knew how stupid it was of him to fear the food in front of him, and yet he did anyways. The scene of his father's banquet still haunted him - bleeding mouths and black tongues and swollen throats, the bulging eyes that stared at him accusingly. He remembered how acrid the poison had tasted, how it had felt as though he'd eaten fire itself.

And then the heat had followed.

It was easy not to eat when he thought of what would happen if he did. An omega needed to be well-fed in order to enter heat. Seokjin would not suffer through another one if there were no nutrients to ready himself.

“My body can’t handle anymore suppressants,” Seokjin admitted. “I don’t want to go through another heat anytime soon either. The last one was not...pleasant.”

He wondered if Captain Joon remembered how his soldiers had found him, the stale taste of heat clinging to Seokjin’s shape as he bathed in the blood of the alpha that had attacked him. The alpha winced, features softening.

It seemed he had.

“It’s not good for you to go without food,” Joon coaxed. “I understand that you’re scared, but you can’t just not eat. You could die!”

“I won’t die,” Seokjin protested, but he didn’t believe his own words. “I’m careful. I eat a little when one of the servants tells me to. I never go completely without.”

He found the strength to look back at Joon. The alpha’s face was curious. He looked soft and gentle, but his lips were twisted into something angry. For some reason, Seokjin could tell he was trying very hard not to get mad.

“I had a few servants prepare some dishes,” Captain Joon settled on saying. He ran a hand through his hair, shaking his head.

“Please,” he continued. “Eat some of it.”

Seokjin glanced at the dishes he’d noticed earlier. So that was why they were here. He swallowed and ignored the eager rumbling of his tummy. “How can I eat it?” he forced himself to say. “There could be something in it.”

Joon furrowed his brows. “What do you mean something in it?”

Seokjin looked around the room meaningfully. “I am a servant, Captain Joon. A helpless, weak omega that you have brought into your quarters. Is it that strange of me to question your motives when offering me food?”

Aphrodisiacs or poisons, Seokjin thought darkly. *Whichever it is, I’ll die either way.*

Joon’s nostrils flared, a growl rising in his throat. “I would *never* - “ he started.

This time it was Seokjin who interrupted. The omega gestured to the plates and plates of food. “Then won’t you join me, Captain Joon, and lay all of my fears to rest?” he offered, narrowing his eyes.

The alpha stared at the food for a moment, before he let out a long sigh. He looked to Seokjin and fiddled with his gloves once more. “The food is for you,” he said gruffly. “It was supposed to be *just* for you. But if my partaking of it makes sure you eat, then so be it.”

Seokjin nodded his head and sat beside the table, crossing his legs. The food was certainly appetizing. If he was the Seokjin from before, half of the food would’ve been devoured already. But now he was a different Seokjin and so he merely stared at it, almost afraid of the horror it might bring him.

Captain Joon moved over and sat in front of him. He reached over to grab a pair of metal chopsticks and nudged another towards Seokjin for him to use. Seokjin did a double take at the sight of them. He was so used to silverware that he'd mistaken them for a knife upon first glance.

Chopsticks. Did Captain Joon think him a simpleton?

Of course he does, Seokjin chided himself a moment later. You are a former whore. A palace servant. You've never used a fork or knife in your life, remember?

Joon dug into the food begrudgingly, obviously perturbed that his great benign act of the week hadn't gone according to plan. Seokjin's eyes hardly ever left him, always making sure to catch sight of what the captain ate. Only after Seokjin saw the alpha chew and swallow something did he in turn dare raise it to his lips.

He ate slowly and in small bites, going against every instinct in him that screamed to stuff himself full. He was so very hungry, and it'd been so long since he had good food. But he couldn't afford to waste all of his progress.

Seokjin told himself he would allow himself this one meal. Surely Captain Joon would be appeased once the omega finished a reasonable amount. The alpha would be able to puff out his chest at his successful act of charity and never bother Seokjin again.

"You will start eating again, I hope," Joon said. He wiped at his mouth with a napkin. "I'll send the doctor to examine your progress in a week or two."

Seokjin's grip tightened, squeezing the chopsticks so hard that, had they been wooden, they'd have broken. He gave a nod. "Forgive me for asking," Seokjin began, voice strained. "Why?"

Joon looked at him. "Why what?"

"Why are you so worried about me?" Seokjin asked, feeling angrier the more he thought of it. "I don't know you. The only connection we have is that your men found me in the streets and you brought me to the palace. You've said you're not after a good fuck, so then why would you even bother with me?"

He felt a little victorious, seeing Joon flinch at his vulgarity. The alpha floundered for a few seconds before something in him settled. "It's my duty to make sure all of His Majesty's subjects are safe," he declared.

Seokjin couldn't help but scoff. "'His Majesty'? What king do you speak of?" he mocked. "The one that's dead or the one that's pretend?"

"I can assure you the next king is very much real," Joon said dryly.

"Then why don't the people, or even the servants in the palace, know his name or face?"

Joon kept his silence, staring at Seokjin with hard eyes before he rose from the table. "Make sure you eat the meals you're given from now on. It won't be good for you if you don't."

"What meals? Are you going to start feeding me every day, complete with a taster for poisons? How nice it will be for me, to then have to scrub the dishes you've so graciously provided!" Seokjin sneered.

"You'll eat what's given to all the servants," Joon stated through clenched teeth, as if it were obvious.

“You mean the scraps?” Seokjin’s pitch rose. “Pardon me, Captain Joon, but I refuse to eat after you and your kind like some sort of pig.”

Perhaps Joon would slap him for his insolence. Honestly, Seokjin was surprised he hadn’t already done so. It was amazing how much control this alpha had. Most would have snapped by now at the lack of respect Seokjin was giving.

Seokjin wanted the captain to get angry, if only because it would stop this charade he was putting on. The second he laid hands on Seokjin, he’d no longer be the kind, benevolent alpha he was trying to hard to be. Instead he’d be his cruel and ugly true self, and Seokjin would be free to hate him.

“Scraps?” Joon sounded rather alarmed. “Shouldn’t all servants be given at least one meal before bed?”

Seokjin rose an eyebrow. “No. The kitchen servants, at least, have never been treated to this meal you speak of.”

He looked down and picked at the noodles in front of him. His stomach growled, still hungry despite the one plate he had finished.

“I’m sorry,” Joon began. “This was...unfair of me, then.”

The alpha nodded to the table of food, eyes never leaving Seokjin’s face. Seokjin felt his scar sting, and he wanted so very badly to cover it in that moment. He settled on turning away and chuckling dryly.

“What are you sorry for, Captain?” Seokjin mused. “None of it should concern you.”

“Well, it does,” Joon said shortly. He tugged on his gloves, fiddling with them once more. “If I can guarantee that the servants are given a proper meal before bedtime, will you eat it then?”

Seokjin’s lips twisted into a frown. “I suppose,” he said curtly, hoping only to placate the bothersome alpha.

Perhaps Joon realized it was all Seokjin would willingly give, for he gave a curt nod, nostrils flaring. “I do care about all of the servants here, Jin,” he said carefully, gently. “I’ll prove it to you if I must.”

“There’s really no need,” Seokjin began hastily, but Joon was already out the door before he could finish.

The captain obviously didn’t see Seokjin as a threat, as he left the omega alone in his room with all of his things. Seokjin could have easily stolen away a few precious books or even just wrecked the place. Instead he finished another plate full of food and rose to gather the others.

He was a servant after all. Perhaps that was why the captain left him there. Somebody needed to clean up the mess.

Seokjin carried out the unspoken task given to him without complaint, though his sour mood said otherwise. It took two trips to gather all of the dishes and bring them to the kitchens. Suran waved him over once she saw what he had brought, eyes shining.

“Captain Joon had those made. He stopped by the kitchens himself for them,” she whispered, excited. “Did you see who he was dining with? He made sure he wasn’t going to be disturbed.”

Seokjin shifted around. The last week or so he had heard often of the admiration held for Captain Joon amongst the servants. It was no stretch to imagine that if word got around of Seokjin's meal with him, his life here would become even harder. Even though his plan to endear his former bullies to him had worked and both Leah and Ru viewed him in a much friendlier, albeit awkward, light than before, he was hesitant to make himself a target. The dinner meant nothing to both Seokjin and Captain Joon, but it would surely mean a lot to a few lovestruck servants.

"There was no one else there," Seokjin told Suran, shrugging his shoulders helplessly.

It wasn't really a lie.

Suran deflated, sighing. "Damn. I'd hoped you would have seen them! Taoru told me he was for sure it was Lady Min, but I said it had to be Maria! Then Chaerin told me it was the both of them, because why else would he need that much food? And then she said it wasn't anything romantic, they were just going over some changes in staff."

Seokjin listened to her rant, amused. "Did you have a bet going on and everything?"

Suran rolled her eyes. "Not yet," she muttered. "But we were getting there! I'm sure if Captain Joon ever takes to courting, we'll definitely have to pool our bets on who it is."

For some reason, Seokjin tensed. "You don't think they'd make it public?" he asked quietly.

"The captain?" Suran laughed. "He's the most private rebel I've ever met! It's only thanks to Maria that half of us learned his name. I doubt his claim would be too public."

"Seems so," Seokjin agreed, though he only had more questions regarding the strange alpha.

As Seokjin made his way back to the omegas' quarters, he noticed more servants scurrying back and forth than usual, all of them in a tizzy as they whispered fervently and straightened their clothes. He opened the door and found Jimin there, along with Leah and Ru. It was odd to see Jimin retiring so early in the night. The former gisaeng was putting Taehyung's collar away in a wooden box as Seokjin closed the door shut behind him.

"Has something happened?" Seokjin asked, only a little worried. "Why are you taking it off?"

Leah answered his question, piping up from her corner of the room. "Maria's not in charge of us any longer, and we've heard new management is going to crack down hard. If we wear anything more than the standard uniform, we could be kicked out."

Ru made a noise in the back of her throat. Seokjin glanced over to see that she was wearing her own uniform correctly for once. There were no stains or haphazard tying of strings to be seen. "I think it's ridiculous. They let us do it in the first place, so what's the problem now?"

"They want order," Jimin murmured. His hands traced over his collar slowly, lovingly, one last time before he shut the box. "They had no idea how to run a palace at first, but now they're finding their footing. It won't surprise me if the new rules will be similar to the ones at Adviser Paek's estate."

Seokjin's nose twitched at the mention of Adviser Paek. The old beta's ghost followed him everywhere it seemed.

"Why are you back so early, Jin? Finished with supper already?" Leah's tone wasn't accusatory. Instead she sounded curious.

An image of Captain Joon came to mind, picking at his gloves as he stumbled over his words. Seokjin could still smell traces of him on his skin, the smoky scent that had his stomach twisting into something unfamiliar. The former prince swallowed.

“Yes,” he admitted, voice faint.

Jimin reached over to pinch Seokjin’s arm, eliciting a yelp. “Did you really eat?” he chided. “It’s not healthy if you’re all skin and bones.”

Seokjin rubbed at the irritated spot and sent a mock glare Jimin’s way. “I ate plenty for once,” he scoffed.

“For once,” Jimin repeated, frowning. Seokjin was grateful that he left it at that. He turned away and missed as Jimin leaned in a tad bit closer to him, brows furrowing as he sniffed.

“If they’re giving Maria the boot,” Seokjin spoke up, eager to change the topic. “Then who will replace her?”

The faces of both Leah and Ru soured instantly, and even Jimin’s nose twitched, lip curling slightly. So the new head servant was not well-liked by any of them? Interesting.

“Min Duran,” Leah said, looking like she had a bad taste in her mouth.

“Lord Min’s cousin,” Seokjin murmured. Young Mistress Min, the one at the trial. Were her and Yoongi that close, for her to be summoned and then put in charge of something so important?

“She’s awful,” Ru complained. “Adviser Paek once summoned her to his summer house for a visit, and she treated us servants horribly. I can just imagine how bad it’ll be once she’s in charge around here.”

Jimin gave a small nod, eyes blank. “Yes,” he agreed. “I didn’t care much for her.”

It was all he would say in front of the others. Later, when Leah and Ru and the other omegas had gone to sleep, Jimin crept over to Seokjin’s cot, shaking him awake. His lips were twisted into a frown, and he spoke with a sense of urgency.

“Who was the alpha you were with?”

Seokjin blinked, sleepy mind taking a moment to catch up to what he was hearing, before he stiffened. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. Even if I was with an alpha, what business is it of yours?”

Jimin rolled his eyes. “I can smell it on you,” he hissed, grabbing a hold of Seokjin’s wrist as he tried to pull away. “You’ve been close with an alpha today, and if I had to wager a guess, I think I could put a name and face to the stench.”

Seokjin was silent, weighing his options. He decided on telling the truth, which Jimin had already deduced. “I haven’t been eating very much lately, so I fainted. Captain Joon happened to come by. He brought me to his rooms and fed me. That’s all that happened.”

Jimin’s grip tightened. “So I was right,” he said faintly. “It was Captain Joon. Oh, Jin. Did you not know?”

“Know what?” Seokjin asked coolly. Whatever revelation Jimin was about to impart, it was of little consequence to him. He cared nothing for Captain Joon.

“The Bangtan Four. He represents the Woo family as the East Pillar,” Jimin’s voice sounded so very soft, as if he was trying to lessen some blow.

And Seokjin cared nothing for Captain Joon, so why did Jimin’s words make him feel so cold? He thought of the captain as he must’ve stormed the palace walls, tearing down the Kim banners and laughing as he caught sight of the dead, dumb nobles in the dining hall. Seokjin thought he knew of Captain Joon’s role in the Uprising, and yet he hadn’t thought it would have been as hands-on as it really was.

Captain Joon hadn’t just been some foot soldier carrying out orders. He himself was one of the Bangtan Four. It was so obvious that Seokjin almost wanted to laugh at his own stupidity. He knew Yoongi as the North, Lord Jeon’s son as the South, and General Jung as the West. He’d assumed the elderly Lord Woo represented the East. Seokjin had been wrong.

“I see,” he said, letting nothing show on his face. Because really, there was nothing for him to feel.

It didn’t matter that Captain Joon had seemed genuine, that he had smelled so nice. An alpha was an alpha, despite what sort of kind mask they might put on.

“You should be careful, Seokjin,” Jimin pleaded. “I don’t doubt your words, your resolve. It’s Captain Joon that I worry over.”

Seokjin frowned. “Why?”

“Alphas only want one thing from a pretty omega,” Jimin insisted, reaching over to trail his fingers across the scent glands in Seokjin’s neck. The former prince couldn’t help but shiver.

“I’ve seen the way he looks at you.”

“And how does Captain Joon look at me?” Seokjin scoffed.

Jimin smiled thinly, withdrawing his hand. “As if he’s a man starved, and you’re the only thing he has to eat.”

Seokjin swallowed, looking away as he felt his face and neck warm, flustered. “He can look all he wants,” he settled on saying. “I’d rather die than let any alpha have me.”

“Even when your heat finally comes, and you’re dying to have one inside you?” the other omega asked, raising an eyebrow. His words weren’t meant to be mean, yet they stung Seokjin anyways.

Jimin continued. “You can’t starve yourself forever, and it will come. It always does.”

He reached out once more, this time hoping to grab Seokjin’s own hand, but the former prince pulled away, bristling.

“I’ve made it through a heat before on my own,” Seokjin declared boldly, baring his teeth. “I’ll make it through any others after in the same manner.”

Jimin shook his head, lips pursed. “So you say now. The longer you go without a mate, the worse the heats will get. It will burn you from the inside out, just as suppressants do. You could die, and then all of your efforts will have been for naught.”

Seokjin clenched his teeth, seething and stewing on Jimin’s words. If that was the case then perhaps he could find a beta to help him through it. Suran perhaps. She liked him well enough.

“You needn’t worry about Captain Joon,” Seokjin said finally. “Or any alpha. I can take care of myself. If not, then I’ll find some beta who can help.”

Jimin nodded. He looked relieved that Seokjin was taking his advice to heart.

“I’m glad,” he murmured.

For a moment he seemed to be reaching up towards his neck, before he realized the collar was no longer there and his hand fell back to his lap, curling into a sad ball on top of his thigh. Jimin ducked his head.

“Sorry for waking you,” the omega said bashfully. “I smelled the captain on you earlier and became...anxious.”

“It’s fine,” Seokjin said. He was surprised to find that it was. Jimin’s concern didn’t needle at him as it would have before. Instead he felt a little touched.

“Jimin,” Seokjin spoke up before the other could leave his side and return to his own bed. He tried to keep his voice steady, but failed. “How long have you known?”

It was not Captain Joon they were speaking of anymore, but Jimin’s slip-up.

Jimin turned back, green eyes almost glowing in the dark as he sought Seokjin’s gaze. The former gisaeng’s expression prodded at Seokjin’s memory, so very familiar. “It was after the trial, when you told me your plans for the Bangtan Four, the rebels. I had thought, ‘He sounds so very much like a king’, and then I remembered the baths,” he explained.

“Your shirt had been wet, so I’d caught sight of the gisaeng tattoo on your back. Or at least I thought that’s what it was. It was rather odd-looking to be a simple gisaeng mark, I remember thinking. But then I told myself you must’ve been from the north or west, where private gisaengs are marked differently.”

“Was that it?” Seokjin asked hoarsely. “My declaration and my mark was all it took?”

“No,” Jimin murmured. “It was your eyes as well, my prince, for they look so very much like my love’s.”

Before Seokjin could even wake for his early work in the kitchens, all of the servants were summoned to the throne room by Min Duran, who ordered them to line up in columns of where they worked and in order of experience. Seokjin was put in the third line, seventh to last. A few other kitchen hands had been hired within the last week or so, and they were put in neat order behind him.

Duran was a rather short woman, even with the tall shoes that she wore. She looked very small and frail, almost childlike in her puffy Western dress. Her hair was done up in the style of a courtesan or wife, yet her fingers were bare of rings. With too much rouge and not enough kohl, she was trying very hard to be taken seriously.

To each servant, Duran asked their name, age, dynamic, marital status, and former occupation. Depending on what they said, Duran would either flick her hand or turn her head towards the aide by her side, who followed her every step and scribbled down notes in response.

Once the young mistress had taken note of everyone, which proved to be a long and tedious process, she cleared her throat.

“Two hundred and eleven of you,” she declared. “Do you know what that means?”

Nobody dared speak, which was a good thing. Duran’s question was rhetorical. “The last Kim king had more than thrice that number. Perhaps you think because of how little there are of you, you have more value. Perish the thought. You’re not special. We could grab any commoner off the streets to replace you, one more eager and desperate to please.”

“Some of you have passed my inspection. Others have not. Those who failed to meet the standards of a palace servant have been put on probation. I will give you a week in order to prove your worth and fall in line. Failure to do so will result in immediate termination.”

“Do you understand?”

The majority nodded their head fervently, thoroughly cowed by Duran’s lecture. A few others murmured their assent. Seokjin nodded his head once and left it at that. He would not grovel at this woman’s feet.

One servant had the gall to fall to their knees, speaking in a shaky tone. “L-lady Min, forgive me for speaking without permission, but how are we to know if we have passed? What are the standards we strive for, Lady Min?”

Something passed over Duran’s face, and a tense silence followed. Finally, Duran spoke again. “Wear a proper uniform. Cooperate. Do what we say when we tell you to do it. And as you work had, remember to stay *out of sight* , *out of mind* . The lot of you are enough of an eyesore as it is.”

The servant who had come forward and spoken flinched, then stood and shuffled backwards, embarrassed.

Seokjin lowered his gaze as Duran’s eyes swept over him, not wanting to paint a target on his back. He wondered if he already had during the trial. Duran dismissed the servants with a flick of her wrist as she barked orders to get back to work. The lot of them scurried off like ants, eager to prove themselves to their new overseer. Seokjin caught up to Suran as they left the room.

“She didn’t say why Maria was kicked out,” Seokjin murmured close to the beta’s ear.

Suran threw Seokjin a glance, smirking. “Poor management,” she whispered. “Or at least that’s what I’ve heard. She didn’t watch us enough, didn’t feed us enough...The list goes on and on.”

Seokjin stumbled. “Oh,” he said dumbly.

He thought of Joon’s words, an empty promise that perhaps was not empty after all.

I do care about all of the servants here, Jin , he’d sworn. The captain had promised to give them all decent meals, yet it seemed to come at the cost of other freedoms with Min Duran in charge. Seokjin gritted his teeth. Was all of this his fault? Had he been the catalyst which woke the rebel leaders from their sleep? Had he encouraged them to organize the servants, and thereafter organize themselves?

The former prince dug his nails into his palms, furious at no one but himself. The thought continued to gnaw at him all day, as he took dishes back and forth for a good scrubbing. Even when one of the chefs had patted him on the back and told him he could try his hand at making the food tomorrow, he could only crack a small grin.

Instead he was thinking of his next step. He’d fully assimilated into the palace as a servant, but what move should he make now? Seokjin hoped that any of Min Duran’s changes wouldn’t

challenge whatever plan he made.

He knew many of the nobles' weaknesses, their blind spots. It would be easy to slip a bit of poison in a chalice here, sprinkle it over a plate there. Wouldn't it be a fitting, ironic death for such cowards?

But then his position would be compromised. They'd look to the kitchens first, and Seokjin didn't know if he'd pass their scrutiny. If they dug too deep in to his circumstances, they'd find connections to Mun Kai and Yerin, the gisaeng whose house Prince Taehyung once frequented. All they needed to do would be strip of his shirt and gaze upon his back, confirming his identity.

No. Seokjin would have to think of something else. Perhaps he could -

"Jin!" a voice called.

Seokjin flinched, hugging the cask of water closer to his chest. He turned around slowly, carefully, though he knew who it was going to be.

Captain Joon was dressed similarly to how he had been yesterday, though the scarf he wore around his neck was a different color. He waved his hand to Seokjin, as if he was greeting an old friend, and the smile on his face split from ear to ear.

Seokjin forced himself to relax as the alpha approached him in the hallway. They were in the Jung wing, which was far, far away from the Woo wing where Captain Joon resided. Seokjin had pawned his duties there off on Suran, who gave him her work with the Jung Clan in return. He'd been in the middle of delivering more water to Young Mistress Jung, the general's sister, whenever Captain Joon called out to him.

The omega sank to his knees, ducking his head. "Captain Joon," he addressed him respectfully, distantly.

"Please, there's no need for that!"

Seokjin could hear the fluster in the alpha's words, could just picture the flush on his cheeks. He was not prepared for him to reach out, however. The alpha's gloved fingers circled around his forearms, holding them in his hands. The leather was rough against Seokjin's smooth skin, but Joon's grip was gentle as he raised him from his knees.

Seokjin looked up, meeting Captain Joon's eyes. It was mistake, surely a mistake, for his breath caught in his chest and his heart nearly stopped.

"You look better," the alpha commented, a low, proud rumble in his chest. "I hope you slept well."

"Of course, Captain Joon," Seokjin forced himself to say as he tore his gaze away. He felt a little frightened by what he saw.

At that, the alpha let him go, tucking his gloved hands back by his side. "Please. I've never been one for such formalities. I would have you raise your head and speak to me as you did before."

So the captain preferred his willful nature over his demure mask. How strange. Didn't most alphas want their omegas meek and timid? Seokjin obeyed the captain's command nonetheless and decided to drop the pretenses as Joon wished.

"Is it fair to assume you want to be insulted?" Seokjin asked, a teasing tone instilled in his voice. "Having a simple servant speak to you in such a way?"

Joon smiled once more, and the expression was so soft and sincere. “I suppose,” he began. “But you are not a simple servant, are you?”

Surely he did not mean -

Seokjin raised an eyebrow, though his heartbeat quickened. “Oh?”

“I only meant - that is to say,” the captain stumbled over his words, gesturing with his hands. “You are different, in a good way! Not like others, but special?”

Seokjin merely stared at him, amused. The captain was grasping for some sort of statement to correct whatever blunder he’d thought he’d made. Finally, he spoke again.

“You are very pretty,” the alpha said lamely. “And strong. So yes, you are not simple.”

Seokjin laughed. It was not a mocking thing, but something pleased. He felt something inside him puff up at the praise, as starved for affection as it was.

“Thank you, then,” he smiled. “You’re rather pretty and strong yourself.”

He could almost understand what Jimin meant now, as he held Captain Joon’s stare.

If he truly does have a...fondness for me, a weakness if you will, Seokjin thought. Then I can use that.

One pillar at a time. That was the way to go. He’d start with Captain Joon, then follow with Jung, Yoongi, and Jeon.

He knew what his next step was.

Chapter End Notes

AN: in case you missed jimin’s slip-up, it was whenever he addressed seokjin as “seokjin” earlier, whenever he should only know him as “jin” :)

Jimin warned seokjin to stay away from the big bad alpha, but will seokjin listen :))))))
seokjin is slowly but surely opening up more to the other servants in the palace, in particular suran and jimin.

I didn’t reply to all of your comments but pls know that i cherished each and every single one!! Pls follow me on twitter: [Selenellene](#) if you want to know updates about rising sun’s progress!

other links:

[FANART](#) by the lovely nammijinni !!

[8tracks playlist](#)

<3 love you all and hope to see you soon xoxo

Revelations, Both True and False

Chapter Summary

Seokjin's plan starts off rocky. The same can be said for Namjoon who delves into Jin's past and discovers unsettling secrets.

Chapter Notes

i promised a double update this time around on my twitter, but that didn't happen :(you guys voted for Yerin's POV so that's the OC's POV you will see next chapter, i promised to have a whole chapter dedicated to her (being the double update), but i didn't want to make you guys waiting any longer for that to happen

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Suran was the first to notice Seokjin's change in appetite.

"You're eating," she remarked, raising her brows though she appeared pleased.

Seokjin gave a lazy shrug. "It's hard not to when they feed us decent food now," he said.

It was a lie. Seokjin had to prepare himself for each swallow, eating slowly as he tasted for any hint of something foreign. The kitchen servants were now ordered to prepare breakfast and supper for all of the servants, including themselves. Though this required Seokjin to rise earlier than usual, he found it was worth it. He'd choose losing a few hours of sleep over feasting on the nobles' scraps.

Ever since his encounter with Captain Joon, he saw him often in the hallways of the Woo wing and the gardens of the palace. The captain preferred to do his afternoon reading under the shade of an oak tree and send for a servant to bring him refreshments. More often than not, he requested Seokjin. The omega would find him sometimes nodding off with a book or scroll in his lap, head rolling back to lean against the trunk.

"Not enough sleep last night?" Seokjin asked.

The captain's eyes fluttered open, and he smiled, as he always did, so very surprised and pleased to see Seokjin there with his afternoon snack. Even after the third, fourth, or even fifth time of Seokjin joining him, Joon remained as shocked as ever at his presence.

"There's not enough time in the world," the captain responded, taking Seokjin's tray from his hands.

Often he wanted Seokjin to sit beside him on the grass, but the omega refused. It would look bad to be seen sitting so close to the noble he was meant to serve. Simply standing and speaking with the alpha should do enough to maintain his interest and build his trust.

"What are you reading today?" Seokjin asked, leaning over to try and peek at the book in his lap. It

was written in English, which he'd discovered the captain spoke fluently from his studies abroad.

"A play," the alpha began. "It's about a brave, loyal general. The king he serves is a good king, well-liked and fair. But the general decides he wants more than to simply serve. He wants to rule, so he kills his king. His ambitions drive him mad in the end."

"If you've already read it, then why are you reading it again?" Seokjin asked, crossing his arms over his chest. "You already know how it's going to end."

Joon tapped his head. "It helps me retain my ability to read English for one. For another, it's one of my favorites."

Seokjin hummed. "If the other nobles knew you had such a play in your possession, would they not worry about its circulation? The story doesn't seem like one they'd like any to read. It might give people...certain ideas about their next Kim king."

"Perhaps," Joon agreed, smiling. "So it's a good thing none of them can read it."

Seokjin stared at him for a moment, watching as the alpha took a sip of the tea that had been brought. Seokjin wondered if his prodding would get him anywhere today. So far it was useless.

"Suppose they could read it," Seokjin started. "Would they feel inspired? Or does the next king command too much awe, too much respect for them to even entertain such thoughts?"

Joon remained silent, pondering over Seokjin's words. "I suppose," he said. "He is the same as any other Kim. He has the blood of a phoenix, so many may see him as a god. He's just a man, though, one far less mad than any of his predecessors."

Seokjin gritted his teeth only a little. The captain knew who it was that they had selected, had probably even held a major say in the matter being one of the four Bangtan pillars. Still, he refused to slip and give Seokjin a name. It was all the former prince would need. Once he knew who the Bangtan Four hoped to crown, he could protect his birthright with a simple stroke of his knife. Anyone fostered by the Woo Clan was sure to be as delicate as a flower.

"You speak better than most, Jin," the captain commented, shooting him an appraising look. "Did you have a tutor?"

Seokjin stiffened. "Only those employed by the brothel I worked at," he said shortly.

He didn't wish to speak of his imaginary past and hoped Joon would leave it at that. A shadow fell over Joon's face, pages crinkling in his tightened grip.

"Of course," he agreed, though his eyes told a different story.

"Are you done with your tea?" Seokjin gestured to the tray, eager to leave.

"I suppose," Joon sighed. He made no move to hand it over as he usually did, lowering his gaze back to his book.

Seokjin frowned, annoyed and perhaps a little let down at the uncharacteristic behavior. Or was this an example of Joon's true character, the side he showed when he was too annoyed to give his all pretending?

The omega waited for a moment more, but when Joon still refused to hand the tray over, ignoring him in favor of reading, he huffed and made to grab it for himself. As Seokjin leaned over, Joon's

eyes lifted to his face. The alpha jerked at his sudden, close proximity, and the movement caused one of his knees to hit Seokjin's shin.

Seokjin hissed at the pain, swaying for a moment as he tried to recover his balance. He failed and fell across Joon's lap. He heard the captain's sharp intake of breath as he took in their position, which to an outsider's eye would be very, very improper. Seokjin settled on top of one of Joon's legs, straddling it, and Joon had grabbed his waist in an effort to steady him. They were nearly chest to chest, neither one daring to breathe.

Joon's gaze was consuming, scorching, and Seokjin felt very light-headed and muddled. Was this how it truly felt to encounter a compatible alpha? Or would he have been so pliable in the hands of Mun Kai and any other alpha if he'd not taken suppressants back then?

The captain's eyes lowered to his lips, pausing on them for a moment, before they went even further and settled on his neck, where the newly high-collared servant's uniform hid his scent glands from view. Scent glands which were no doubt emitting subtle, strong pheromones. Joon rubbed a slow, cautious circle into Seokjin's hip, before he raised his hand up, up to the omega's collar. He opened his mouth, ready to form a question or maybe even an order, but Seokjin shifted.

Suddenly there was a sharp pain alongside his inner thigh, poking into his sensitive skin.

He jerked away immediately, the alpha's other hand leaving his waist as he did so, but found that it was only Joon's book. It had fallen between the captain's legs, and once Seokjin shifted, he landed on one of its sharp points.

Seokjin stood, grateful that the captain had removed his hands. Joon made a noise in the back of throat.

"I've got to go," Seokjin blurted out, stopping whatever train of thought the alpha had. He grabbed the tray quickly, darting away from Joon's searching hands as he made his exit.

"Jin!"

He barely heard Joon's call over the loud beating of his own heart, flustered and thrown off. Once he was a considerable distance away from the gardens, he hid behind a pillar to catch his breath and calm his heartbeat.

Seokjin paled. He felt something strange in his stomach, a twisting that he couldn't unwind, and then there was - oh, Gods. Why? All at once, he was mortified and disgusted by his own body.

There wasn't much. Once he realized what was going on, he clammed up and that put a stop to any of the thoughts that fueled his reaction. He knelt, pressing his legs together in an effort to stop what little slick there was. This had never happened before. Outside of his first heat less than a month ago, Seokjin had...never released any slick. He was too busy to engage in any dalliances, especially when they could be used to control him, and Seokjin could have never risked his virtue, knowing how essential it was to his worth.

Yet here he was, getting wet at some random alpha's smell.

He whimpered quietly at the memory of it, at what he'd been trying so hard to not acknowledge, and hoped with all of his might that no one would pass by, and even if they did, it would be a beta who couldn't smell or some alpha with a poor sense of smell. Seokjin didn't want anyone to share in his shame, especially if it might catch anyone's interest.

Stupid, he chided himself. *Stupid, stupid, stupid!*

If Seokjin had truly been thinking straight, he would've used that opportunity. He would've leaned forward, met the captain's lips and ensnared him for good, perhaps taken his hand and pressed it against his neck. But he hadn't.

Seokjin didn't want to admit it, but he had been frightened. He hated this body of his, the weak and easy way it opened up at just a whiff of Captain Joon's scent. He'd felt a part of him eager for the alpha's touch, craving the feel of his leathered palm against his neck. Seokjin had never really entertained an alpha before, only ever going so far as to goad a few nobles over dinner with sultry looks and tentative touches. He'd gone for walks with the Crown Prince of Qing when he'd visited, and while a kiss or two may have been stolen under the shade of blossoming trees, Seokjin allowed nothing more than that.

So he didn't know what he was doing, at least to a certain point. Seokjin had plenty experience playing the temptress, but when it came time to hand over the long-awaited prize, he balked. He'd have to play things safe with Captain Joon, as this was a playing field unfamiliar and far more dangerous than he'd initially believed.

The encounter that afternoon served as a wakeup call of sorts, and Seokjin distanced himself from the alpha he'd set out to seduce. He made himself scarce in the kitchens, never volunteering to serve Captain Joon his snacks. He found that the captain no longer requested him either, but that was for the best. The cool dismissal of what had transpired, the brief attraction that had *surely* been reciprocated by Joon, didn't bother Seokjin.

Not in the slightest.

Seokjin spent a total of three months working at the palace before he finally received Taehyung's reply to his letter, which itself was dated a month ago. One of the betas tasked with taking care of the aviary had sought him out.

"It was a nightmare to find you!" he cried. "You wouldn't believe how many other Jin's there are!"

Seokjin took the letter with a smile, expressing his thanks and asked to be dismissed from the kitchens for but a moment. One chef agreed begrudgingly, and so Seokjin left to read the letter away from prying eyes. His brother's wax seal showed that it surprisingly hadn't been tampered with or opened yet.

In it, Taehyung was rather vague. He spoke of his displeasure for Seokjin's plan and his worry for his safety in the palace. Taehyung said that the madam was treating him well, that he had all he could ever ask for and more.

I will be heading home soon , the letter read. Just know that you are welcome to join me, should you change your mind or encounter troubles. I've been in touch with C.Y. He's extended his offer again. Please think on it.

~ Tae Tae

His brother had signed it with two swooping hearts as well, to which Seokjin had to giggle. It was very Taehyung-like. Though the meaning behind his brother's words was worrisome. He was heading out to the country, probably somewhere he'd used to live with his mother and grandfather. He'd been in contact with Chanyeol as well, though Seokjin would not dwell on that extended offer for now, not when he had other things to worry about.

He thought of what he should say in his next letter, if he should even tell Taehyung the details of his plans. He concluded it would be too risky. What then should he write of? Another moment of thinking, and he had his answer, tucking the letter within the folds of his uniform.

He would not be the one to write Taehyung.

Jimin would.

Later that night, Seokjin crawled inside Jimin's bed, cold nose pressing against the back of his neck.

"Tell me about my brother," he implored. "And you."

"There's not much to tell, really," Jimin murmured. "He came to Madam Yerin's and saw me. He thought I was beautiful, so he kept visiting me, again and again, until suddenly he thought he was in love."

"He wanted to introduce us, picked out a pretty collar and everything - the same one you always wore. He never did that for any of the other gisaengs he thought he loved," Seokjin admitted. "It seems we were destined to meet, one way or another."

Jimin stilled. "Yes. He'd said something along those lines."

The other omega's shoulders shook, body trembling as he sobbed quietly. Seokjin felt something in his chest ache, knowing that Jimin's grief was undeserved, and yet he couldn't reveal Taehyung's survival until he knew the truth of their split, until he was sure of Jimin's feelings.

Seokjin shushed him, rubbing his back gently. "Jimin, can you tell me? What happened between you? Why did we never meet?"

It took a few minutes for Jimin to gather himself, for the tears to stop. "I had to give him up," Jimin sniffled. "He'd fallen out of favor with your father, and the next day he showed up, ring in hand and ready to get married."

"I wanted so, so badly to say yes. Taehyung...he was my whole world, and yet...yet I couldn't let him throw away his future for me. Before I met with him, Yerin had spoken to me. She...she said that if I ran away with him, if I pursued anything, that I would ruin him. Taehyung was already fighting with his father, and if it was learned he had a lowborn omega at his side? He'd never be able to climb back up from that sort of scandal," he babbled, blowing his nose into one of the bedsheets.

After a few more sobs, Jimin regained his composure, speaking in a shaky, dull voice. "I had to reject him, if only to save him. At least that's what I thought. The next thing I know I'm stuck here, serving the very same brat who cut Taehyung down."

Seokjin went over Jimin's tale in his mind. He thought of Taehyung the day the alpha left the palace, smiling and brimming with far more excitement than he should have in his banishment, then of Taehyung when Seokjin next visited him, withdrawn and sullen as he stared outside of his narrow window, waiting for something or perhaps rather someone.

"You love him," Seokjin started. "Even after all this time?"

Jimin turned over, fixing Seokjin with a watery stare. "Always."

The paper crinkled in Seokjin's grip as he pulled it forth, holding it out to Jimin carefully. The

omega blinked, brow furrowing as he didn't move to take it from Seokjin.

Seokjin took a deep breath. He wondered if it was the right course of action, to let Jimin know, to trust in him, or at the very least in his love for Taehyung. In that moment, he realized it was a lot like his trust for Yerin. As long as they shared a common goal, which was bringing Taehyung back home - to his true home, by their side - then Seokjin could trust him.

And so he unfolded the letter, pushed it into the other omega's hands, and said, "Dry your tears, Jimin. My brother still lives."

After Seokjin trusted Jimin with the secret of his brother's survival, the omega's entire disposition seemed to change overnight. Gone were the dark circles and red-rimmed eyes, replaced by a healthy flush and sparkling eyes. He woke with a smile on his face, greeting the others cheerfully as he readied for the day.

Leah squinted, scratching her terrible bed head as she stared in disbelief as Jimin proceeded to prance out the door, a skip in his step as he went to complete his daily duties. She shook her head and snorted, "What's got him so happy? Has Lady Min been fired? Or are we having meat later for lunch?"

Seokjin chuckled, shrugging on his undershirt. "Maybe he's just eager for that festival that's coming up. Lady Jeon's already given him permission to attend, remember?"

Though Seokjin knew the truth behind Jimin's good mood, he decided to humor the others. What he said was true after all. With the new recruitment of servants within the last few days, Min Duran was letting the most well-behaved and deserving servants out to celebrate the annual Festival of the Dying Sun amongst the capital streets. So far only a handful had been given colored permission slips, which Jimin received just yesterday morning.

Ru finished her braid, humming. "Not a festival," she chimed in. "And certainly not meat! I think it's more important than that!"

Leah put her hands on her hips, scowling. "Oh, really? Then tell us, wise one. What's got him so excited?"

Ru smiled, eyes looking somewhere far away. "Love," she breathed. "Jimin's got to be in - "

Seokjin threw his pillow at her face before she could finish what she was saying. "Love?" he cackled. "That's just great! I can only imagine Jimin's face when I ask him who his sweetheart is!"

Leah's giggles soon joined him. "Exactly! I mean, Jimin? In love? Please!"

Ru flushed, arms crossing her chest. "You two are so...so...so immature! You wouldn't know love if it hit you in the face!"

Seokjin pretended to swoon. "Careful, Leah! If you keep smiling at me, I might think you're in love! Maybe even with me!"

"Jin, my dearest! I was thinking the same of you!" Leah proclaimed, catching him in her arms as he flopped back dramatically.

Ru huffed and muttered something about them being 'dumb, stupid idiots' as she stomped out of the room.

“Ru, you can’t leave! You have to tell us how you know Jimin is in love!” Seokjin called after her, giggling.

It was safer to mock Ru’s wisdom, for her words were far too close to the truth. Seokjin wondered if he would have to talk with Jimin and convince him to tone down his joy, if that were even possible for the other omega in such a situation. He’d learned that his lost love wasn’t really so lost after all. Seokjin couldn’t fault him for being happy. His bright attitude could draw unwanted scrutiny, being so different from the personality many knew him by, though Seokjin came to the conclusion that it was harmless enough.

That afternoon, Young Mistress Min called on the servants to gather in the throne room, ordering them in lines as she did last time. She had two servants trailing behind her, the personal attendants she trusted most. As Min Duran passed each servant, her attendants would hand out colored slips. It was soon murmured down the lines that a blank, white slip was a dismissal from the palace. Red was a warning, whereas green represented approval. There were only a few pink or blue slips, which more or less excused the servant for the festival.

Duran wore another Western gown, this time made with a rich velvet material and a neckline far more revealing than the last. Seokjin thought it was funny she decided to wear such a design when her breasts were smaller than his own clenched fists. The colors - or the lack of them - reminded Seokjin of Yoongi, who had always worn neutral shades of black, brown, and white. Her face looked sharper due to the dark makeup she wore, and her hair was in a loose braid behind her back this time.

The high heels remained.

With each step she took, they clicked against the marble floors, instilling fear within the servants she passed. Her little goblins handed out dismissal slips with smirks on their faces, and Seokjin wanted nothing more than to wipe their faces clean, perhaps with a cleaver or his own hands.

The young mistress stopped suddenly, and Seokjin jolted, realizing that she was right beside him. The omega turned, nostrils flaring, and before Seokjin could even think to lower his gaze, she caught it.

Duran raised an eyebrow. “Jin, is it?” she asked, far too sweet to be sincere.

Seokjin bowed his head as he knelt, barely daring to breath for fear he might snark something back at her. Instead he obediently said, “Yes, Young Mistress.”

“Young Mistress,” Duran mocked. “You certainly know your titles, it seems. Go ahead and enlighten the rest of the servants, won’t you? They’ve all taken to calling me Lady Min since I arrived.”

Seokjin tensed. He didn’t know what Duran wanted: for him to succeed or fail? He settled on the truth, vainly wanting to show off his knowledge. “You belong to the Min family, but you are not of the main line. On top of that, Young Mistress, you are an unmated omega. It’s only proper to refer to you as such.”

He lifted his head only a little. Duran’s hand caught his cheek, a splitting pain that raced alongside his healing scar. Her small hand wasn’t enough to turn his cheek, and Seokjin caught a glimpse of it as she withdrew it, ruby red and almost puffy as she clutched it with another. The only thing that stopped Seokjin from killing Duran was that the slap seemed to have hurt her more than it did him.

“Lower your eyes, whore. You’re so well-spoken, shouldn’t you know that?” she scoffed.

“Forgive me, Young Mistress,” Seokjin murmured, pressing his forehead to the cool floor as he bowed this time. He ignored the churning in his gut, the flame that blazed between his shoulder blades.

“Young Mistress, Young Mistress. Who told you to call me that? Everyone else properly calls me a lady, can’t you do even that much?” It sounded like Duran was...whining.

“To refer to you as anything above your station would be less than proper, Young Mistress,” Seokjin couldn’t help but say, face still burning a little from the slap.

The throne room was completely silent for a moment, and it seemed nobody wanted to breathe, for fear they would miss more of the exchange between the infamous Min Duran and some common servant. Then suddenly, Duran was snapping her fingers.

“Dismissal papers,” she snarled. “Now.”

Seokjin narrowed his eyes, taken aback at Duran’s childish and impulsive nature. He’d expected better from Yoongi’s cousin, the omega chosen to take the Min seat at court. Seokjin felt only a little worried, wondering how he’d pushed her to the limit so easily. Had he overestimated her? The Min Duran he’d observed these last few weeks was as calm as any teenager could be.

“Lady Min,” one of her hobgoblins muttered anxiously, shifting their papers around.

“You presume to tell me what is and isn’t proper,” Duran stated, aghast. “As if you’re learned. As if you’re *above* me.”

“Lady Min!” the hobgoblin insisted.

Duran continued, scoffing. “I know all about you. You’re that gisaeng from Yerin’s brothel. You were at the trial, too, the one concerning Lord Woo’s granddaughter. Madam Yerin shouldn’t have taught you much more other than to spread your legs and look pretty.”

Her eyes flicked over to Seokjin’s cheek, and her lips curled into a smirk. “Though I suppose when you go back, looking pretty will be a lot harder for you to do.”

Seokjin bristled, clenching his jaw. The other servants had gotten used to the scar, so it had been awhile since he heard snide remarks concerning it. Seokjin had almost forgotten it was there, choosing to ignore mirrors so that he might ignore his face. It was still a sore subject, something that would perhaps always light a fire in him. Before he could get to his feet and perhaps rake his nails across Duran’s painted face, one of the hobgoblins spoke up once more.

“Lady *Min!* ”

“What?” Duran snapped, rounding on the hobgoblin. “What is it? What’s the problem? I told you to hand him the dismissal papers!”

The hobgoblin shivered, watery eyes akin to that of a scared rat. “The list!” she squeaked. “The kitchen servant Jin? He’s on the list.”

Duran furrowed her brow. “The list,” she said slowly. She looked back over at Seokjin. “ *That* list? Who put him on it?”

Her assistant murmured something far too low for Seokjin to hear, but Duran must’ve heard. Her face paled, and she took a deep breath. “Oh?” she commented, deathly calm.

Yoongi's cousin turned her gaze to Seokjin once more, and she stared at him for a few minutes more. Seokjin wondered what it was she saw there, because it seemed as though she came to some conclusion, looking away and scowling.

"Give him his papers then," she spat.

The hobgoblin obeyed, and Duran moved on, as if she hadn't just gotten done embarrassing herself. Seokjin rose back to his feet, clutching the colored slip in his hand carefully. It was far from the dismissal papers Duran wanted for him. Instead, Seokjin was given permission to attend the upcoming festival.

A signature at the bottom right corner of the slip revealed just who it was that put Seokjin on the list granting him permission. A smirk tugged at the corner of his lips, and his cheek stopped singing.

Seokjin wondered if it was possible he hadn't fallen out of favor with Captain Joon yet.

A day before the festival was to start, Namjoon's request for the Office of the Interior's files finally went through. Copies of the documents he requested were set on his desk in a neat stack, each paper carefully written out by one of the royal scribes. He noticed them there after lunch and instantly felt himself buzzing with excitement, an eager anxiety he knew all too well. And yet Namjoon knew he could not get to them yet. He recognized a mountain of other documents on his desk as well, state materials and government matters that required far more attention than the background of a harmless kitchen servant.

He finished with those late into the night, and so he read Jin's papers by candlelight, hands trembling a little as he held the documents up. There wasn't much to say about Jin. His birth certificate was included, with his full name being listed as Park Jin and both parents unknown. One paper confirmed his service at Yerin's brothel, though the details were rather vague. The Office of the Interior had chosen to include other papers, though, ones belonging to Yerin's other gisaengs and even Yerin herself.

It made sense considering there was so little on just Jin. If Namjoon truly wished to discover the details of Jin's past, he'd probably have more luck investigating the others involved as well. Or at least that's what he had hoped. Though he went over the others' documents several times, he found nothing of note.

Namjoon sat back, sighing, and rubbed at his temples. He felt a headache coming on.

Since the day the omega had been brought to Namjoon after killing Mun Kai, the captain had a sneaking suspicion there was more to Jin than what meets the eye. No ordinary omega could kill a trained soldier like Mun Kai, let alone one on the verge of heat. The distance that Jin kept and the disdain he showed for the palace were both no coincidence. It was obvious he did not align with the Bangtan Four's cause.

He blended in rather well among the servants, but his natural beauty was something not even a minor scar could diminish. It was not the look of a commoner.

The more that Namjoon saw of Jin, the more convinced he became. The omega had an eternal fire inside of him, crackling and burning day after day. Namjoon was drawn in like a moth to a flame.

He glanced at Jin's papers one final time, resignation already setting in. His search would prove fruitless it seemed. His eyes lingered on the exchange of sale to the brothel, on who exactly had

transferred Park Jin into Yerin's care.

He blinked and read it again, barely daring to breathe because how could he overlook something as simple as that?

He could see the man in his mind's eye. He was a short, older omega with strange green eyes.

He'd sat by his mistress's side dutifully, day after day, clutching her weathered, wrinkled hand and murmuring prayers for her good health. Namjoon remembered his mother grabbing a hold of his shoulder, whispering a warning in his ear.

"Don't get too close to the omega whose company the queen keeps. He is Adviser Paek's whore."

Though Namjoon was young, he knew what such a vulgar word meant. The queen's personal servant had chased after an affair with the scheming adviser, who was enemy to the queen and Namjoon's mother. Such a betrayal was unforgivable, yet Queen Sumi still allowed the servant a spot at her deathbed.

Could it really be possible? Namjoon thought of the rumors he'd heard at Lord Woo's estate, of the manor that Adviser Paek kept near the palace. His own personal brothel that he filled with mistresses and bastards alike. Many once joked that Adviser Paek had enough bastard children to create his own army if he so wished.

They'd found Paek's manor soon after the uprising, and with it, they discovered the corpses of every bastard and mistress that lived there. Was it so far-fetched to believe that one of them may have survived? Especially if they had not lived in the manor in the first place?

Because the exchange of sale for Park Jin, who could not have been more than a babe at the time, was between the queen's former servant and Yerin herself. Where or why would Adviser Paek's whore have a child, then abandon it to a gisaeng house, if the child had not been their own, a nameless bastard with nothing to inherit?

Namjoon sucked in a deep breath. Indeed, it seemed that Park was almost a sad mimicry of Paek.

He set the documents down and closed his eyes. He wondered what it would mean if word got out that one of Adviser Paek's bastards had survived. Paek's lands had already been divided up amongst the other nobles of the Bangtan court, and so even if Jin was acknowledged as his legal son, he stood to inherit nothing.

Yet noble blood still ran through his veins. A legitimization would open doors for Jin that were previously closed. As an omega, he could marry far above his previous station, perhaps serving as a third or fourth concubine.

Namjoon swallowed, throat dry. It would not be so strange for a king to take on a second mate, would it? Especially the last omega of the coveted Paek line.

For once, Namjoon found himself hoping they might find the Crown Prince soon, if only so he might be free to pursue another.

NAMJOON!! UGH WHAT ARE YOU DOING!!!!

next chapter: Namjoon and Jin come to an understanding as the festival kicks off. Meanwhile, a shadowed figure watches on and reminisces.

thank you all for the wonderful comments! I haven't responded but i love and cherish every one of them!

i'm sorry if this chapter seems short, but i hope to make more things happen in the next chapter. maybe it's overly ambitious of me but i hope to have that out before the end of july :) i really want to finish this arc just so i can start off the new one cuz i'm SUPER excited for it!! :))))

Festival of the Dying Sun

Chapter Notes

tw: graphic description of a miscarriage, mentioned noncon & rape aftermath

ok, so any of ya'll seen the kdrama Mr. Sunshine??? I can officially say that that's the setting I've had in mind when writing this fic so there ya go *insert crazy eyes emoji here*

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The day of the festival found all of the servants sleeping in later than usual, enjoying their day off. Jin was still woken up early by rustling sounds, and he sat up to find Jimin searching through his chest of clothes. The omega had already decorated his face with makeup and curled his jet black hair loosely, pinning it in place with a familiar jade comb.

“You are not the first gisaeng that this palace has collected. While you were recovering at my house, I sent several of my best as moles. If you are ever in need of friends, my prince, then wear this comb. They’ll know you stand on the same side as them.”

Yerin’s words rang through his head, and yet he pushed them aside. Jin could be assured of Jimin’s loyalty, if only due to his hatred of Yerin. The former gisaeng had never spoken of her favorably. The comb was surely just a memento, something that Yerin gave to all of those in her service, and by no means a symbol of affiliation.

Jin had placed his own jade comb underneath his cot, hidden between it and the wall. He hoped he would never have to use the comb.

His debt to Yerin was already great enough.

“The main events don’t start until sundown,” Jin began, raising an eyebrow. “Why are you getting ready now?”

Jimin turned to Jin, red lips curving into a smile. “I have a special role to play unfortunately,” he admitted. “Lady Jeon arranged it for me.”

“Oh, really? And what would that be?”

Jimin pressed a finger to his lips, eyes glittering. “It’s a secret,” he sang. “You’ll just have to wait and see.”

Jin rolled his eyes and plopped back down on his bed. It was too early for him to play that sort of game.

Jimin rifled through his chest a few moments more, letting out a sound of triumph as he pulled forth what was no doubt his costume for the night’s activities. Jin glanced over and nearly had his breath taken away at the sight of it.

The gown was made out of a beautiful, sheer white material, covered in stones that glittered with long, silky sleeves that spilled down the arms. The back of it was cut rather low in a v-shape, which

would without a doubt give a perfect view of Jimin's gisaeng tattoo.

"Well," Jin cleared his throat. "You'll certainly grab everyone's attention with that."

Jimin beamed, and Jin couldn't help but think that happiness suited him rather well.

He set the dress down carefully and gestured Jin over. "Come here! I'll do your makeup and hair before I leave."

Jin waved a hand, feeling his cheeks go hot. "There's no need for that," he protested. "I have no one to impress."

"It's not about impressing anyone," Jimin puffed out his cheeks a little. "It's about feeling better in your own skin. Unless you don't like wearing makeup?"

Jin shifted awkwardly. How was he supposed to know whether he liked wearing makeup or not, when it was something that had never been allowed for him in the first place? Anything that was too feminine had been forbidden by his father, who was determined to ignore that his one and only heir had presented as an omega.

"I've never worn it," Jin admitted. "My father thought if I was caught with it on, then my secret would be out. An alpha, or even a beta, those were the only things I could be mistaken for."

Jimin frowned, silent for a moment. "Did you ever want to, though? There's no shame in wanting to feel a little pretty."

Jin thought of the bottles and boxes of makeup he had one day stumbled upon in his mother's drawers, the excitement he'd felt as he'd swirled his fingers around the creams and powders, painting his face with silly strokes of wild color. Jin admired the way they made his mother look pretty again, the way they covered her sickly pallor and swelling bruises.

He himself had been curious, only a little curious, but whatever fascination he had with makeup died as soon as one of his father's servants stumbled across him playing. The king's ensuing wrath had rewarded Jin with a lashing.

His mother could comfort him only so much, growing weaker and weaker by the day. She could barely sit up in her bed as she held out her hand, drying away her son's tears slowly.

"That man does not want you to look weak. He wants a strong son, one who looks like a proper alpha male. I know you were only playing, but you must know your place, yes? A future king does not wear makeup. He does not dress in gowns or pretty hanboks."

Jin had only cried harder, confused at his mother's words. "But why does looking pretty mean you're weak? I don't understand."

His mother drew her hand away and stared up at the ceiling of her room. "Tell me, Jin. Who is the prettier of the two, me or the king?"

Jin sniffled. "You, of course."

"And do you see where my prettiness has gotten me? I am stuck in this bed, wasting away as every inch of my body aches, while your father lounges on my throne, holding the entire country in the palm of his hand. Believe me, Jin. You do not want to be like me. You should never try to be pretty."

And so he hadn't. Jin could not help his natural beauty, however, and the face he'd gotten from his mother only seemed to look more and more like her as the years went by. As the resemblance grew, so too did his father's hatred.

His presentation had only cemented things. The realization that he was an omega, the culmination of every weak, pretty, feminine thing his father hated? It only made Jin work harder to suppress the things he might have wanted.

Now that Jin was supposed to bring those things back up, trying his best to appeal to an alpha, he found he didn't want to.

"There is no shame," Jin lied to the other omega. "But I'm not ready for that kind of thing. I think I'll pass."

Jimin looked a little put out, but he didn't press the issue, instead collecting his makeup to put it back.

"If you ever change your mind..."

"Yes, yes. I'll for sure come to you, Jimin," Jin insisted, ducking his head. "Thank you for offering."

Jimin beamed, and Jin had to wonder why the lies sat so heavy on his chest.

Jin had never attended the Festival of the Dying Sun before. The festivities were deemed too dangerous, renowned for being chaotic and crowded, and so he'd been forced to watch afar from his balcony as the commoners and even some nobles set off their fireworks and waved banners. The whole point of the festival was to say goodbye to the summer days that became shorter and welcome the approaching autumn winds.

The changing of the seasons was the gods' will, after all, so there was no choice but to welcome it.

Jin could understand the point of it. It was one last hurrah the people had before they'd have to be cooped up in their homes once the snow came, worrying about how much food they had to last them or when the firewood might run out.

Suran guided him through the busy streets, ducking under the gold and crimson banners that swooped over them. People carried streamers in their hands while a parade sauntered down one of the main roads. There were people singing and dancing, so much laughter that Jin could barely understand it.

He'd never seen such happiness before.

Suran never once let go of his hand. She took him from one food vendor to the next, offering him tasty, sweet things to try. There were fried dumplings and meat sticks, even some little cakes. Jin licked his fingers clean after each one, realizing that it was becoming easier for him to eat.

They met up with Leah. The other omega was watching a puppet play, droll stare showing her disinterest in the story.

"Where's Ru?" Jin asked her, realizing that her partner-in-crime was nowhere to be seen.

Leah rolled her eyes, scowling. "Who knows? She's been disappearing more often than not nowadays."

“That’s odd,” Suran commented.

“Maybe she’s just tired of hanging around you all the time,” Jin teased. He expected Leah to bite back with some retort, but she was silent, lips twisting into an unhappy frown.

Jin took her hand. “Come with us! We’re going to go see the dancers.”

Leah followed reluctantly, though her frown faded.

There were some dancers who spun fire torches in their hands and kicked them with their feet, while others danced simply with fans. Jin looked on, amazed. He’d been taught how to dance by one of his instructors, and though he’d done well enough, he hadn’t had nearly as much talent as these performers.

Eventually the stage cleared off and the curtains were drawn shut. Once they opened again, one lone dancer was in the middle of the stage.

Jin’s eyes widened at the costume, the familiar shimmering white that Jimin had showed him. There was no doubt on who was about to perform. The song started slow with gentle strings, and Jimin spun and twirled in time with it. Soon the drums joined in, beat becoming faster with every move Jimin made. He was a flurry of white, sparkling in the sunlight. Jin felt his breath taken away.

Jimin slowed, looking towards the crowd. He was wearing a sheer scarf to hide the bottom half of his face, but his green eyes met Jin’s automatically. The other omega winked, then sped up his twirls again in time with the song.

As the music slowly faded and Jimin curtsied, Jin felt Suran shift beside him.

“That was my father’s favorite song,” Suran spoke up, voice strained.

Jin looked over, smile slowly disappearing as he saw the grief on her face. Suran had never spoken of her family before.

“Your father?” he probed cautiously.

Suran smiled, though it looked very wrong on her face. “He was a royal scribe, much like Leah. He was always allowed to come out to this festival. I liked to ride on his shoulders so I could see everything. This festival was...one of the few times I was allowed to see him.”

Leah shuffled her feet. “What happened to him?”

Suran waved her hand. “What happened to all the Kim servants, of course. Poisoned and slaughtered by the Bangtan Four.”

“Suran!” Leah hissed, looking around frantically to see if anyone had overheard the spiteful way Suran mentioned their new rulers. “Lower your voice!”

“I didn’t say anything traitorous,” Suran argued. “I’m merely stating facts.”

Jin stared at her for a moment. “What do you mean the Bangtan Four killed the servants?” he was trying to understand it. “They say it was the king who did it, right?”

Suran laughed. She looked at Jin like he was crazy. “For someone so smart, you can be real dumb sometimes. Why would the king kill his own servants? That doesn’t make any sense. Everyone

knows the Bangtan Four are just lying.”

What.

This was very new information to Jin, who looked at Suran blankly. “Why didn’t you say any of this before? Or why did you come to the palace to work for them, if you believed that?”

“I needed work, especially with my father gone. The Bangtan rebels were hiring. Money is money. I send most of my wages back home every month,” Suran admitted, shrugging her shoulders.

Leah tried once more to hush her, face turning red in frustration. Suran merely stared at Jin, lifting her head high, as if ready for whatever judgement she thought he would give her.

Jin blinked, finding that his mouth was suddenly dry. Was it excitement that he felt, or a simple joy? He’d thought Jimin would be the only ally he’d find in the palace, the only other person who hated the Bangtan rebels nearly as much as him.

Yet here was Suran, his first and closest friend confiding the same.

Of course she was a little mistaken. Jin’s father *had* been the one to poison and slaughter his servants. Really though, the rebels could be blamed, so Jin didn’t think even on “enlightening” her.

He smiled, and his next words were swallowed by the roar of the crowd around them as they cheered for the next act on stage.

Suran’s eyes brightened, though, and her lips lifted into a smile, proving that she had heard them even amidst the noise.

She laughed, pulling him along to the next vendor that caught her eye. Leah followed close behind, muttering all the while.

“If you just told me you hated the Bangtan rebels from the beginning,” Jin had told Suran, “I think we would have become friends much faster.”

As night fell, several fireworks were shot off. Jin came back with Suran to look at the stage again. The dancing looked even better at night, especially for those that danced with fire. Jimin performed once more, and his dress dazzled brighter in the moonlight. Eventually the crowd in front of the stage cleared off, leaving a wide open space for the attendees to begin dances of their own. A few tried their hand at Western dances, while the couples beside them stuck to the more traditional ones.

Leah was whisked off by some beta merchant who asked her to dance, hearts in her eyes. Jin couldn’t wait to tease her about it, especially since she’d been giving Ru such a hard time as of late.

Suran patted Jin’s hand and jerked her head in the direction of a food stall. “I’m going to grab something to eat. Wanna come?”

Jin felt a little sick at the thought. He’d been trying bites here and there all day, and though he was getting his appetite back, it had already been enough for him. “I’ll pass,” he said. “You can go ahead. I’ll just watch the dancing.”

Depending on how one looked at it, this was either a very good or very bad choice.

Jin found himself caught up in watching the people before him, all of them laughing and smiling as they danced to the music and waved the flags with suns on them. He didn't realize how long Suran had been gone until several songs later. He looked over in the direction she'd said she was going, but she was nowhere to be found.

His stomach churned. The last time he had been left in a crowd, he'd been nearly assaulted. Jin had not forgotten the smell of Mun Kai's breath, of the fingers that tried to steal themselves inside, the bruising grip and the foul words. He could almost taste the blood on his tongue, see it on his hands.

The noise didn't help. There was screeching and whooping all around him, and suddenly it no longer eased him. It turned into one loud, resounding scream in his head, one that wouldn't go away.

Jin took a deep breath, closed his eyes. He thought of Taehyung, trying to find comfort, but it only made things worse. He remembered Taehyung leaving in a daze, chasing after something that Jin just couldn't comprehend or see.

He was alone, just as he'd always been.

For a second he swore he felt phantom hands grabbing his wrist, Mun Kai's voice crooning in his ear, but he shook the delusion away.

Idiot, Jin chided himself. *Aren't we over this already?*

He forced himself to open his eyes, to prove to himself that there wasn't any Mun Kai lurking in the shadows like he thought.

And the world went silent at the figure he saw before him, the cacophony of music and voices seemingly muted. The only thing that Jin could hear was the beating of his own heart, loud and persistent as it thrummed against his chest.

"Captain Joon," he found himself saying. "Enjoying the festivities, I take it?"

The alpha was dressed as plainly as always, yet his hair was clearly brushed out and fixed in place, his face and clothes clear of sweat or dirt. Jin wondered how such simple things could make his heart beat so fast.

"Jin, " the captain greeted, "I've been meaning to speak with you. It was hard for me to find the time, let alone the words I wanted to say."

He said this all in a great rush, as if afraid that Jin might turn and flee before he could get his thoughts out. Jin merely stared, eyes cold and calculating. The omega's face was expressionless and gave nothing away, but he nodded for the captain to continue. He wondered if the captain thought to set things straight and create a permanent distance between them, as their stations required, or if he meant to chastise Jin for the untoward behavior exhibited that afternoon.

Jin wasn't expecting an apology.

"I'm sorry," Captain Joon said. His eyes looked rather morose, lips tugged down in a frown.

"I didn't mean to scare you," Joon insisted. "I know that things like that probably bring back trauma of yours."

"It didn't. At least with you, it did not," Jin admitted, without realizing the weight of his words.

The captain lowered his gaze, cheeks a little red. "I'm glad. I hope we can be good friends, Jin."

He held out one of his hands. Jin looked at it for a moment, something uncomfortable rolling in his stomach. Was it, dare he even think, disappointment? Regardless, Jin grabbed the alpha's hand, wrapping his fingers around warm, smooth leather. If Joon wanted to disguise his interest as simple friendship, then so be it. Jin could work with that.

Or at least he hoped he could.

Captain Joon was pulling him forward, and the next thing Jin knew, they were standing in the open space reserved for dancing. "Dance with me," the alpha insisted, tone surprisingly sure. "Please."

Jin pursed his lips. He brought his other hand up to Joon's shoulder, fingers barely brushing against the edge of his scarf. He threaded his other fingers through Joon's own, grip firm. It was a Western dance that he was initiating. Jin was sure that Joon, having studied abroad, should know it.

"After you, my lord," Jin demurred, eyes hooded. Perhaps it should have been obvious that Joon lead, being the alpha between the two of them, yet the captain said nothing about Jin's words permitting his role.

He merely beamed and placed a heavy hand on Jin's hip as he lead him through the dance. The both of them knew what they were doing. Jin wondered if Joon had been put through rigorous dance lessons in his time abroad, or if it was something he'd just offhandedly picked up. Jin himself had been taught by the tutors Adviser Paek hired, though he'd always been leading in those. Jin blamed his occasional stumbles on this.

To fill the silence between them, Jin decided to probe Joon a little more.

"This new king," Jin began. "Will he allow more Western influence into our country? We sometimes wear their clothes and dance their dances. When the foreigners come here they don't leave their own customs behind, but force us to adopt their own."

"It's hard to say," Joon responded, tilting his head to the side. "Though I'm sure the only influence he'll allow is a positive one."

"And what will the new king do about Qing?" Jin asked. "I've heard the First Prince is upset at the loss of the Kim dynasty. Wasn't he quite close with the Crown Prince?"

"You hear many things it seems, Jin," Joon murmured fondly, before his voice sharpened. "If you were listening more closely, you'd have heard the emperor has nothing to fear. The Kim dynasty is not as lost as they say it is."

Joon spun him rather quickly, and Jin focused on landing his foot correctly, feeling a little winded as Joon steadied him.

"How so?" Jin breathed. There was something in Joon's eyes that he liked, something in the curve of his lips as he smiled.

"You won't get his name out of me that easily," Joon reprimanded. "I'm rather surprised. I didn't take you for a gossip."

"I'm not a gossip," Jin flushed. "Merely curious. You can't fault me for that."

Joon stared at him for a moment, before pulling him forward close enough that their chests

touched. Jin's eyes widened as Joon's gaze darkened, as he felt his hand hot against his hip, fingers curling in as if to make some sort of brand.

"The only servants I've ever met that are that curious about politics are moles," Joon whispered against Jin's ear, causing shivers to run down the omega's spine.

Jin felt so helpless in that moment, as if he wouldn't be able to move, yet a second later Joon was pulling away. His features softened. "But you're not a mole, Jin, are you?"

Jin swallowed and forced himself to laugh. "Of course not," he agreed. "Why? Has something happened that's made you doubt the servants?"

The captain merely looked at him, then out at the sea of dancers around them, the crowd of people milling about. The two of them had stopped dancing once Joon pulled him in closer.

"No," Joon shook his head, smiling. "It's nothing. I'm just teasing."

Whatever spark might have been in the air between them fizzled out, and there was something awkward left in its wake. The two of them sort of stared at each other, perhaps neither knowing quite what to do.

Jin wondered irrationally how many omegas Joon had courted before, then scolded himself for the thought because it wasn't his business and it didn't matter.

"Will you take a walk with me?" Joon finally said. "Away from the crowd."

Jin nodded his head, curious. It seemed like Joon was nervous, and the sudden need for privacy was a tad suspicious. Nevertheless, Jin let himself be pulled away. And wasn't it odd, that he wasn't scared to be alone with the big bad alpha who held his hand too tightly and looked at him with dark eyes?

The sounds of music and laughter faded in the background as the two of them ducked inside an alley, darkness only broken up by the moonlight that shone down. As Joon came to a stop, he retracted his hand and Jin found himself missing the warmth of it.

Joon fiddled with his gloves for the hundredth time. Jin wanted him to take the damn things off already, but he regrettably did not.

"Jin," Joon started. "Perhaps it isn't appropriate of me...no, I know it's not appropriate! But I wanted to ask you anyways! I think I would have regretted it my whole life if I did not."

Jin swallowed, his cheeks heating up. The cool night air felt ten degrees hotter. "Go on," he allowed.

If Joon said something about friendship or being pals, then Jin would lose it right this sec -

"Are you seeing anyone?" Joon blurted out.

Jin blinked. "Well, I'm looking at you right now, aren't I?"

Joon turned red, and he started to fumble with his words. It was so adorable that Jin took pity on him. The omega's lips curved into a grin, and he shook his head, reaching out with one hand. "Sorry, couldn't resist," he laughed. "But no, I'm not seeing anyone."

Jin's fingers intertwined with Joon's own, and he raised his gaze to meet the alpha's, feeling rather

shy. “Why are you asking?” he was bold enough to question.

“C-courting,” Joon stuttered out. He tightened his grip on Jin’s hand, closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Once he collected himself, he tried again.

“I want to court you, Jin Park. Would you allow me that?”

The use of his fake name gave Jin pause. It sounded wrong coming from Joon’s lips, made Jin’s tummy feel funny.

But that’s who he was, wasn’t it? Who he’d made himself become?

His hesitation made Joon draw away, grip slackening, but Jin darted his own hand back out again, pulling the alpha back in. “Don’t go!” he blurted out. “I haven’t even given you my answer yet!”

Joon frowned, and there was a stormy look in his eyes. “You’re easier to read than you think, Jin. I can tell when something’s wrong. You don’t want this.”

You don’t want me, went unsaid.

Shit. The plan was going to fail before it could even begin. Jin frantically shook his head, trying to think of some way he could turn this around, explain his hesitation in a way that was believable to the trained eye of Joon, who was apparently well-versed in the expressions of Jin.

“I’m just worried. I don’t exactly have the best history with suitors,” Jin admitted.

Joon didn’t look entirely convinced, but he nodded his head anyways, understanding at least of whatever worries Jin might have. He raised his hand, fingers hovering over Jin’s cheek, barely tracing the ugly scar there.

Jin stilled and suddenly found that whatever thoughts he’d rehearsed in his head were gone, dissolved like dust in the wind. There was only Joon, face half hidden in the shadows as clouds partially covered their source of light.

“I would treat you gently,” Joon whispered.

In that moment, Jin believed him. He moved without really thinking about it, body and instincts drawn in by something he didn’t quite understand.

The omega leaned forward, tilting his head up, arching his neck subconsciously in an unmistakable gesture of submission. Jin parted his lips, centimeters away from Joon’s own, but he refused to close the final distance, fearful of the rejection he might face.

It seemed he had nothing to fear. Joon met him halfway. It was not Jin’s first kiss, but it felt like it was the only kiss that mattered. It proved that Captain Joon wanted him - him, Jin! The scarred servant who had nothing, not even a pretty face anymore.

Joon’s hand cradled the back of Jin’s neck, brushing against the edges of his scent glands. Jin shivered and broke the kiss to let out a high-pitched whine.

“Sorry,” Joon panted, neither sounding nor looking very sorry at all. He seemed out of breath already, though their kiss had lasted only a few seconds.

Jin ducked his head and gulped. “It’s fine! They’re just...sensitive.”

And they were. For years they’d been dull and empty thanks to the work of Yoongi’s suppressants.

Now they were awake and eager for any attention Joon might give. Desire pooled in Jin's gut, sticky and hot. He looked up once more and tugged at the front of Joon's shirt, pulling him forward.

Their kisses were clumsy and all over the place. At one point they had to stop and giggle at their lack of finesse.

"Why are we so bad at this?" Jin snorted.

Joon smiled, dimples set deep in his cheeks. "We just need more practice," he insisted.

"Indeed," Jin agreed mirthfully, smiling as he wrapped his arms around Joon's neck.

They kissed once more, for much longer than any of the others. Jin wanted so much more than the kisses. He wanted Joon's hands all over him, touching and claiming him. He wanted things he couldn't quite understand, that he didn't know how to ask for.

Because he could not ask, because it was far too soon, he would be content with the kisses for now, which were sweet and more addicting than he'd ever thought a kiss could be. To be fair, his only experience had been years ago when he was sixteen and Chanyeol had given him a peck or two.

Jin found he much preferred the taste of Joon.

He was musing on this perhaps unfair comparison when several things happened at once.

Joon's hand ran down his upper back, brushing against the exact location of Jin's mark. It was pure reflex that had Jin jolting, jerking his hands back in surprise and bumping Joon's neck. Joon let out a moan, both painful and aroused, and Jin felt as though he was falling, falling, falling just like that day in the gardens. But he was standing still, his stomach doing several somersaults. There were loud bangs and cracks, the sizzling of something on fire. The sky lit up with bright lights that fizzled out, and it seemed like the whole world clicked in place for that one moment.

"Fireworks," Joon acknowledged. He placed a hand to his neck in wonder, laughing nervously. He took a step back, perhaps to escape the searing heat between them. "They set off the fireworks."

Jin just smiled, but it was impossible that was all it was. Jin had felt something pull inside of him, lighting up and stitching together as Joon touched his mark. It was like the phoenix came to life.

But that was impossible. His back had barely burned since he'd entered the palace, and he hadn't been plagued by any nightmares since. Why did it come alive now at Joon's touch?

"We should head back soon," Jin said reluctantly. He held one of Joon's gloved hands in his own carefully. "My friends will be looking for me."

Friends.

What a strange thing.

Jin had to remind himself he was playing a role he'd created, that all of this was pretend. Even however he felt for Joon was a lie, or at the very least a simple desire. Jin would feel the same for any other alpha that showed him attention.

As they made their way back to the crowds, Joon plucked a flower from one of the stalls, dropping his coins onto the vendor's table. Jin raised his eyebrows.

“I didn’t take you for much of a flower kind of guy,” he remarked.

“Then I’m happy to tell you that you’re wrong. I love flowers. My mother taught me every kind there is,” Joon inhaled deeply, smiling.

He held the flower out bashfully. “For you.”

“I couldn’t,” Jin waved his hand, though he felt a blush creeping up his neck. “Flowers have meaning, don’t they? I can’t accept it unless I know what it means.”

He turned away and felt Joon move closer. The next thing he knew, the small white flower was tucked behind his ear.

There was a memory pricking at the back of Jin’s mind, something harmless and yet deadly.

“Daffodils suit you best, I think,” Joon declared, letting out a pleased hum.

And why did that sound so familiar?

“Daffodils, huh,” Jin said, voice far away, lost in a hazy compilation of images and sounds. “They mean what exactly?”

“You’re smart enough, Jin. You’ll figure it out, especially now that you know the name,” Joon sounded so very sure of it.

“Jin!” someone called. “Over here!”

It was Leah.

Joon gave Jin one last kiss, a chaste peck on the cheek, and whispered his goodbye. “Can I call on you tomorrow?”

Jin nodded and reluctantly let the alpha’s hand go, his arm falling to his own side rather pathetically once he did.

“Until tomorrow,” Jin murmured, watching as Joon disappeared into the crowd.

It took a minute before Leah reached him. She was dragging Suran along behind her, who held fancy treats in her arms, cheeks stuffed full of them.

“Who was that with you?” Leah asked, panting as she came to stop before him.

Jin lifted his hand up, turned it over and back again.

“I don’t know,” he said honestly.

Because he didn’t. Not anymore.

Yerin had never liked festivals. In the years past, most of them had been focused on the king or the queen, celebrating the oh-so *great* Kim dynasty. Yerin hardly ever had time for the seasonal ones like these. There was a gisaeng house to run, beta women and omegas to take care of. It wasn’t like Yerin could just drop everything on a whim.

The only reason she was here now, lurking in the shadows, was because she needed to be here. Eunha needed a little more confirmation than just a letter in the prince's handwriting. Yerin's lips

twisted in a frown as she gazed at the crowd through the holes in her mask, catching sight of the Crown Prince.

Looking at Seokjin was like seeing a thousand memories at once, all of which left her aching and bitter. Seokjin was the spitting image of Sumi, from his features to his nature. Arrogant, scheming, and uncaring. Even as he danced with his little omega friends, even as he found a partner in Captain Joon, his true self still shined through. He was a vain, spiteful thing, and Yerin hated him.

She looked away, feeling rather sick.

Yerin couldn't help but dwell on Sumi, seeing her clear as day in her mind's eye. The long, silky hair that spilled down her back, the elegant slope of her nose as she lowered her head, and her pink, puffy lips. Sumi had been a dream come true - the tall, slender alpha girl who spit out suave phrases like she could reach inside your heart and know exactly what it was you wanted to hear. The stereotypical girl crush.

And oh, how she had certainly crushed Yerin.

Unthinkingly, she put a hand to her midsection as it twinged at the memory of pain, of the twisting and turning of her insides as Sumi's curse worked its magic, tearing her womb apart in order to get to the bastard babe it cradled.

Adviser Paek had found her, thighs and hands soaked in blood as she tried madly to gather what was left of her child, as if she could somehow push it all back inside and save her son. Adviser Paek had pinched the bridge of his nose and let out a deep sigh, but he'd called for a maid to come clean her up.

Once it was all said and done, he'd taken her to one of the brothels he ran. It was there that Paek placed the hot iron to her back, branding her as a gisaeng. Yerin had been the one to later institute ink over iron, reasoning with Paek that the black design was far more beautiful than some ugly scars. The work at the gisaeng house was easy for Yerin, who had always known how to lie well, especially when it came to old, ugly men. It took her mind off of Sumi, of their child and the life they could have had.

But just as she had started to numb herself from the tragedy, just as she'd started to forget, Adviser Paek came back. He held a squirming bundle of blankets. The first thing he did was ask her if her milk had dried up yet.

Of course it hadn't.

"He's a bastard," Paek said, handing over the baby. "Much like you're own. Treat him as such, yes?"

For such a small babe, he felt so very heavy in Yerin's arms. She'd trembled just carrying him. "How can you ask such a thing of me? Without even telling who he belongs to?"

Paek rolled his eyes. He did not understand what only a mother could feel, the aching loss of the child they'd carried. "He's mine if that makes you feel any better," the beta told her.

"And the mother? Who *bore* this child, Paek?" Yerin had insisted. If they were dead, then Yerin could accept the betrayal she was about to commit, taking another child for her own.

But if not -

"Jae," Paek finally admitted, shooting her a nasty smile as he turned away. "Your precious Sumi's

handmaiden. Are you glad you know now?"

And oh. How that changed things. Jae had always treated Yerin with disdain, looking his nose down at her whenever Sumi would visit. He'd been the one who sent Yerin from the palace once he learned she was with child, warning her to never come back unless she desired a noose around her neck. Perhaps if Yerin did not know that it was Jae's son she held in her arms, that she would have to raise and feed - then perhaps she could have loved him.

She refused to love Jimin, would not allow herself to. The child was a reminder of Jae and Sumi, of what she'd lost and could never have again.

Yet she hadn't abandoned him.

Yerin trained the boy, taught him everything she knew. It was the least she could do for someone much like herself, a whore with no future.

She caught a glimpse of Jimin standing alongside the other performers now. He was dressed in one of the gowns that Yerin had given him, a consolation for the First Night he had endured. Yerin winced just remembering it. If the patron's pockets had not been so deep, he would have never been allowed inside her brothel. As always, however, Paek made the rules. He said who could be let in and who could not. Yerin learned a long time ago how to pick her battles when it came to the crafty old man.

She opened her doors for the patron and allowed him something so precious as Jimin's First Night. Then once the patron was finished, plied with enough wine and pockets emptied, she unlocked his doors and let him stumble outside.

It was then that she set her men upon him. He lay in that abandoned alley for weeks before a patrolling officer found what was left.

Jimin had been so frightened, crying for weeks in fear that the patron might come back. Yerin had tried all sorts of tricks to get him to stop, but Jimin could not be swayed by fancy trinkets and books. It was only when she'd offered to hire him a dancing instructor that the tears stopped, and she'd then brandished the dress he wore now to seal the deal.

Though it was meant to be worn for special guests or occasions, Jimin never once wore the gown for a customer.

He wore it now, black curls pinned into place with Yerin's jade comb as he spoke to some homely omega. He threw his head back and laughed. It was the first time in a long time that Yerin had seen him smile.

The last time had been....when Taehyung had still come to her brothel.

Before she had torn the both of them apart.

Yerin had to look away, unable to bear the sight of his happiness. Not with the guilt that ate at her, an unfamiliar feeling for someone as resolved as herself.

Everything she did, she did for Taehyung.

She thought of Eunha, who had been imprisoned in the palace for months, raped again and again in the hopes that the mad king might get a child of prophecy on her. A phoenix with witch's blood.

Yerin had not known...not until she saw what was left of her friend and realized that a Kim had

taken something so very precious yet again. Eunha could not bear to look at the child, a reminder of the firstborn they'd stolen away, and she had at first wanted Yerin to take him in. Yerin wanted more than anything to agree. Taehyung who cried whenever she put him down or left him alone for too long was a child that she could love.

But Yerin had taken one look at Jimin, toddling by with one of his dolls in hand, and realized that she could not.

A gisaeng house was no place for a child.

Especially not one of royal blood.

It was because she loved him that she could not raise him, just as Eunha could not raise him because she hated him.

She'd found an older pair of farmers with only one young daughter who were in need of a son, or even a grandson to inherit what little they had.

Eunha had disappeared on some quest to connect back with her magic, which she'd been stripped of during her months imprisoned, so Yerin watched Taehyung grow up from afar. She felt closer to Eunha every time she held his little hand in her own or saw that same boxy grin as he waved at her at the market. His foster mother could not write, so any updates on him were given in person. Taehyung had a normal childhood, and Yerin helped out his adoptive family whenever she could in regards to finances, making sure they were paid handsomely for watching over him.

Things were fine. Things were good.

And then the king had come for his second son.

Yerin received the news far too late, from some traveller passing by. Once she made it back to the little farm, searching frantically for Taehyung even though she knew it would be in vain, she saw what the crows had left of the family that kept him safe.

Taehyung's foster mother Minseo was hanging from the tree in front of their hut, her body swaying from side to side as a sort of warning. Written in her father's blood on a white sheet were the words "THIS IS THE PRICE THE HERETICS MUST PAY". It was without a doubt the work of the king.

Yerin hadn't understood how he had found out that Taehyung existed, couldn't wrap her mind around the fact that he even knew where he was. Then she'd come back to the brothel to find Adviser Paek sitting at her table, sipping tea from her favorite cup. His legs were crossed, face far too smug.

He had been the one to smuggle Eunha out of the palace, and he'd called the doctor who helped deliver Taehyung. He'd even helped Yerin vet Minseo and her parents, making sure they were respectable and safe.

Yerin knew instantly that it had been him. "You!" she hissed. In that moment, the beta was very sure that she could kill Paek. She didn't even care if she hung for it, so full of hatred was she. "Why would you give him up? He's just a child!"

"Oh my dear, you act like the life of a prince is something bad," Paek chortled, mustache quivering. He set the teacup down and spread his hands out, palms up as he shrugged. "Your precious Sumi's son was a dud it seems. The king wanted a replacement, so I found him one. It's as simple as that, Yerin. Calm down, won't you?"

"The king is mad! You gave him to a murderer, and you expect me to calm down?" Yerin snarled.

Paek just gave her a look. "You love Taehyung, yes? Then why would you want him to rot away on some farm without a penny to his name? He could be a *king*, for gods' sake."

Yerin frowned. "But he is not the Crown Prince," she said slowly.

Paek took a deep breath, rolled his eyes. "Not yet," was all he said, before telling Yerin of his plans.

So that's what they'd both worked on, what they'd planned and hoped for.

And yet an unforeseeable obstacle had stood in their way.

Eunha had come back with plans of her own. Yerin had not expected to ever see her again, secretly she'd hoped for the opposite, but Eunha returned all the same. Yerin shivered just thinking on what little remained of her friend, of the hollow horror she'd become, filled to the brim with so much raw, dark magic that nothing genuine was left. The young girl they used to call the White Witch was dead now, her soul resting in the same place where she'd endured such unspeakable horrors. What remained was a twisted, ugly creature hellbent on revenge.

Yerin adjusted her mask, suddenly feeling paranoid, as if Eunha's strange silver eyes were on her right this instant, sensing her less than savory thoughts. So far the former friends had similar goals, and in the end, Taehyung would sit the throne. It was only a matter of time now.

Yerin looked out one more final time, trying to see if she could spot Seokjin again. Eunha had made it clear what she would do once she got her hands on the former Crown Prince, who she claimed carried the seed of madness in his belly. She had sent Yerin to make sure the letter proved true, that Seokjin really was employed as a servant at the palace. One of Yerin's moles had told her the omega would be attending the festival, so this had been her opportunity to get the confirmation Eunha desperately wanted.

It was too dark and the crowd too thick, though. Yerin couldn't see even a hint of Seokjin or the captain he'd been dancing with anymore.

She let out a sigh and turned to leave. The beta pitied the poor alpha that had caught Seokjin's eye.

It would not end well for either of them if Eunha had her way.

Chapter End Notes

i don't rlly like the first part of this chapter and i know that the last part might be an info dump that doesn't make any sense but it WILL!!! i promise!! :))))

i've been dealing with the transition to college life recently so i haven't had any time to update. also i went and saw BTS at Fort Worth on the 15th, if you were there too then i was wearing a shooky shirt lol that was honestly just a great experience and it did a lot for my mental health, which is another reason that i haven't updated lately. I took two months where i've almost always taken one at most. i will try not to make it a habit. thank you to all the readers for sticking with me!!!

pls feel free to comment your thoughts on the chapter or predictions!! they encourage

me to write when i'm feeling down :))))

Next Chapter: one of the omegas is attacked, and jin & joon's fledging relationship is tested. jimin is due for a heat, but jin - who hasn't had a heat in months - shows no signs.

(OR SOMETHING LIKE THAT IDK I FEEL LIKE MY OUTLINE DOESN'T EVEN MATTER ANYMORE I JUST KINDA WRITE WHAT I WANT LOL)

Barren Promises

Chapter Notes

ok so namjoon & seokjin's relationship progresses kind of fast but i mean...we made it here already!! might as well go all in now :P

on a serious note: this chapter deals with rape and focuses on rape aftermath. also there are mentions of (forced) abortion/miscarriage, infertility, menstruation, some body dysphoria, and an oc is murdered.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Things were different for Jin, now that he held the attentions of an alpha. Life seemed a lot like it did in all of the stories he used to read, where the flowers suddenly bloomed and the birds sang and the sky was filled with all sorts of beautiful colors. He felt funny whenever all he could think of was Joon, remembering the thick, heady scent of smoke and timber that followed him.

He thought he understood why Jimin had been unable to contain his joy, how Ru had named his affliction so easily and cooed. Infatuation changed things. It embarrassed Jin, but in a pleasant, tingling way.

He and Joon had resumed their afternoon meetings, but this time it was not Jin serving Joon snacks or tea. Instead the two of them walked the length of the gardens together, and it was Joon who brought Jin things.

The first gift was a silver bracelet engraved with words in the Western alphabet. Much like the flowers, Joon refused to tell what they meant. It was most definitely something sappy. On Jin's days off - which were rare and far between - he wore the bracelet, not wanting to be caught and reported by anyone else for breaking uniform rules on a regular workday.

Sometimes Joon merely brought his words, reciting clever rhymes in regards to how Jin's eyes shined or how infectious his laughter was. "Are my eyes your favorite thing about me?" Jin asked. "You certainly have a lot to say about them."

Joon ducked his head. "It's impossible to pick a favorite thing," he admitted bashfully. "Your eyes are just one of many."

Jin laughed. "You practiced your lines well, darling, that's for sure!"

Joon's lips quirked upwards. He grabbed Jin's hand and slid up the sleeve of his hanbok to hold his wrist delicately. "It's corny, yes, but I'm serious. I don't think I can find a single thing I dislike about you," the alpha declared.

Jin's stomach twisted as a wave of guilt washed over him.

I can think of a few things you'd dislike, the omega thought sullenly. All Jin had done was lie, putting on a disguise to draw Joon in. If the alpha knew the truth of Jin's identity, if he found out that Jin was really the Crown Prince, Seokjin, who the Bangtan rebels had tried so hard to kill, then he would most certainly hate him.

And if he witnessed Jin's ugly, raw insides, if he saw the omega's madness for what it truly was, he would undoubtedly recoil in horror.

There were very few who'd seen Jin's ruthlessness and not shied away from it.

Even fewer that lived to tell the tale.

Yoongi, Taehyung, his father, and -

Jin would not dwell on it. Could not afford to it seemed, because Joon was looking at him rather playfully, opening his mouth to speak.

"Oh?" Joon asked, raising one of his eyebrows. "What sort of things would I dislike?"

Jin stumbled over his own feet upon realizing that he'd admitted those first thoughts out loud. "I snore!" he blurted out, hoping to cover up his true feelings with something silly. He jerked his hand away from Joon.

Joon shrugged his shoulders. "Wouldn't bother me none. I wouldn't hear you over the sounds of my own snoring!"

"I hog the covers, too!" Jin added. Surely Joon wouldn't have a response for something like this, which was one of the ultimate crimes when it came to sharing a bed.

"I prefer the cold when I sleep anyways," Joon stated, which must be a lie.

"I drool! And, and! I kick in my sleep!" Jin huffed, crossing his arms over his chest. It was a challenge to him now, to see what it was that would annoy Joon.

"Cute," Joon commented. His face was a mask of complete seriousness, but Jin could tell it was hard for him not to crack.

"But why are you telling me about your sleeping habits? You're not trying to hint at something are you?" Joon teased, but there was something dark to his tone.

Jin shivered. "No! Of course not!" he spluttered. "I just thought you should know what you were getting yourself into! If you're serious about courting me, that is!"

"Of course," Joon agreed, and the desire in his eyes faded, not quite disappearing. "What should I do to relieve your doubt?"

Jin thought for a moment. He took Joon's hand again, squeezing gently, and this time Joon's thumb roved across the scent gland there. "Stay by me and never leave," he began, feeling warm. "Listen to what I say and give council. Be mine and I'll be yours."

Joon pulled him closer, pressed against his chest. "How long will it take?" he breathed. "To relieve those doubts?"

Jin tilted his head to the side, exposing his neck slightly. "A lifetime," the omega declared.

Joon grinned. "Well, it's a good thing we have that kind of time."

He kissed him softly, chastely, and as soon as Jin could blink, the alpha began to pull away. Jin would not allow it; there was a hunger that clawed at him, ready and eager for more than he could offer. He kissed Joon again, deeper this time, and took the alpha by surprise. Joon seemed unresponsive for a split second before he gathered his bearings and kissed back, with much more

force than Jin expected.

Gone were the clumsy, shy kisses from last week's festival. They'd practiced plenty since then, and now they knew each other's tells. Joon pressed Jin up against one of the hedges, pulling away to gasp for breath, and they sank to their knees together.

"Is this alright?" he murmured, hands digging into Jin's shoulders, creeping dangerously close to his neck.

Jin found himself nodding, letting out a sort of whine. He couldn't form words. Not now - at a time like this, as his stomach did somersaults and his head felt murky. Joon just smelled so good, tasted so good. Jin licked his lips. He wondered if he'd feel good too.

The next kiss that Joon gave him was pressed against his neck, so close to Jin's scent gland that the omega thought he'd go crazy. He threw his head back, moaning. "Joon!" he whined. "Joon, please!"

It was all he could say. As Jin grew hard, he felt that familiar wetness seep between his legs again, thicker and stronger than it had ever been before, courtesy of Joon.

"Hush now, love," the alpha rumbled, voice so sweet and warm. "I've got you."

He kneaded the flesh on Jin's hips through his hanbok, admiring the softness that Jin so despised. "You're so beautiful," he praised. "Smell so good, too. How are you real?"

Jin loved the compliments. They fed his vain, starving ego in a way it had not been attended to in a while. He felt his lower half throbbing, aching for something in particular, and the kitchen servant couldn't help but buck his hips up in an attempt to find it.

Joon let out a long, drawn-out hiss as they collided, Jin's crotch pressing against his own briefly. Jin's eyes widened in disbelief, though it was foolish. If he could smell Joon's arousal, then why was he so shocked to actually feel it?

Jin repeated the action, more hesitant than desperate this time, wanting to confirm that it really was what he thought it was. Joon met him halfway, pressing down and rolling his hips in a move that had Jin groaning.

"Darling," the omega crooned. "Do that again, yes?"

Joon was all too eager to comply, pressing kisses to Jin's neck as they moved together, licking and sucking and undoubtedly leaving marks behind. It was perhaps the least romantic thing, the both of them rutting at each other like animals, but it somehow felt more real, seeking their pleasure in such a way.

They were both eager and hungry. As they moved, the tightness in Jin's stomach grew, reaching higher and higher. Jin whimpered and wanted to cover his face, to shield his ugly, helpless expressions from Joon. He hid his face in the captain's shoulder, and as his pleasure reached its peak, he found he needed something to muffle the sounds of his moans. Before he knew what he was doing, his teeth were already sinking into Joon's shoulder in a small, light bite.

Joon made a choking sound, and a moment later it was clear that he'd found his release as well. He rested on top of Jin, a boneless, heavy weight. For a moment they merely lay there, basking in the afterglow of their intimacy.

Joon panted, flinching as he touched the spot where Jin had bitten him. He brought his fingers

between them to examine how badly it was bleeding, and a drop of blood fell onto Jin's cheek, running down in the mockery of a tear. Before it could drip onto his neck or hanbok, Jin caught it with his tongue, eyes never once leaving Joon's honey gaze.

The alpha laughed, though it sounded tight. "You'll be the death of me, Jin. Really, a bite?"

He gently brushed his knuckles along Jin's neck. "Though I think I've paid you back with all of these decorations."

"I would decorate your neck as well," Jin huffed. "If you weren't wearing that damned scarf of yours all the time!"

Joon sat back, tugged at the scarf anxiously. "The scarf stays," he muttered. "For now."

Jin raised an eyebrow, at a loss for why Joon would be so vague about this - the alpha was an open book! "Just like the gloves?" he asked, merely curious.

The captain stilled, brow furrowing. "My hands are not very pretty," he admitted rather reluctantly.

"Neither is my face," Jin responded with a wave of his hand. "Yet you love it anyways. Why would I not feel the same about your hands of all things?"

Joon frowned and stared at his gloved hands for a moment more. Finally, he looked up to meet Jin's gaze. Whatever he saw there seemed to be enough, because a second later, he pulled one of the gloves off.

Jin couldn't help but gasp at the sight of it, shocked as he realized that Joon hadn't been exaggerating. The red skin was a warped, wrinkly mess, bumpy and gnarled. The macabre design twisted up, up, up passed Joon's wrist, disappearing beneath his sleeve, and Jin wondered how far up it went.

"What happened?" Jin breathed, reaching out to carefully hold Joon's hand. He traced each veiny path delicately, as if the slightest touch might bruise it. Joon shivered at his touch, simply pleased that Jin wasn't recoiling.

"There was a fire," the alpha recalled quietly. "A horrible, awful fire when I was younger. I lost my parents and much of my other family. I would have lost my life, too, if it hadn't been for Lord Woo."

Jin closed his eyes, letting his own memories wash over him. He was no stranger to fire or the terrifying disaster it could unleash. He had been nine when he witnessed the great inferno that swallowed so many Kims, among them Jin's very own fiancée. The screams had gone on for hours that night, repeating on a loop even once everyone was dead, but nothing haunted Jin more than the laughter from his father that followed.

It was after this that his father began his weekly burnings in court, picking whatever servant or noble he despised that day and deciding to set them on fire. Jin's presence was required for these rituals, watching from the sidelines as Adviser Paek held him by the shoulders, making sure the Crown Prince did not vomit as the smell of burning flesh stuck in his nose.

He admired Joon's scars, if only because he understood how painful it must have been to receive them. Slowly, he brought Joon's hand to his face, pressing it against the healed cut he'd gotten months ago.

"What a pair we must make," the omega murmured, content and sated. It was such a very foreign

feeling.

A loud ringing could be heard, the sound of the new tower clock going off. The sound did something to Jin, cleared his mind of the haze it'd been under. He jerked away from Joon for a moment, looking around wildly. They were still in the middle of the gardens. Anyone could walk by and see, even if they were hidden by a hedge or two. And Jin's clothes were - well, soaked. Even if anyone didn't see them now, they'd see the pair of them leaving, clothes askew and reeking of each other, the proof of what they'd just done.

"Oh no. What if someone saw?" Jin's hands shook as he grasped Joon's shirt, voicing his fears outloud. "Gods, what if they smell us?"

"No one saw," Joon assured him calmly. He brought Jin's hands to his lips, kissing each trembling finger. "And they won't smell us. I made sure the gardens were cleared of guards and servants alike before we took our walk. We still have a little bit of time before they return to their posts. You can easily head to the servants' baths and rid yourself of the smell before someone sees."

He leaned forward, nosing Jin's neck to take a deep breath. "Though I will say I will miss it. The smell of us together."

Jin shivered and gave a little nod, but he was still worried. "I should go now," he blurted out. "I have dishes to clean before dinner."

"Of course," Joon's brow furrowed. He looked a little worried, but he allowed Jin to rise and fidget with his hanbok. The captain slid his glove back on. "Can I expect to see you tomorrow? Same time and place?"

Jin paused for only a second before he bent down, kissing Joon one last time. "Yes. There's nothing I'd want more," he murmured.

Then turned on his heel and left.

Right. All according to plan, Jin told himself, pretending he didn't feel guilty or ashamed in the slightest.

Because that hadn't been a part of the plan whatsoever. Even if he had thought on being intimate with Joon before briefly, he'd never really considered what might happen if he followed through with it.

And he especially hadn't thought he would like it.

The baths were blessedly empty when Jin arrived, which was a rather rare occurrence. He quickly shed himself of his clothes, setting them off to the side, determined to deal with them later. He walked to the very back so that he could use the last pool, soaking with his phoenix bared to the wall as he always.

He rubbed at his shoulders with one of the cloths and couldn't help but wonder what he would do if things progressed even further with Joon. Would he have to make sure he rested on his back, for fear Joon might catch sight of his mark? What if Joon ignored him and turned Jin over to see it anyway?

No. That wouldn't happen. Joon wasn't the type to ignore Jin's wishes, and even if he was, Jin

would just bring up the scar. There must be more scars hiding under there, perhaps even worse than the ones on his hand. Jin wondered how badly the damage might be, whether it extended to Joon's scent glands or not. If so, did that mean he could not be claimed in return? The thought unsettled Jin, made something envious and stubborn clench in his belly.

If Joon couldn't be claimed, he might feel free to look at others.

Jin chided himself for that childish thought, however, because even claimed alphas strayed. He'd grown up with the evidence of that. The infected bite mark on his father's neck didn't stop him from fucking his own mate's ladies-in-waiting, though some might argue that was because the two of them were alphas.

A mating between two alphas was cursed by the gods, something volatile and dangerous. Yet Jin's parents hadn't even mated for love. The omega had learned that as soon as he could understand what love really was. He often saw General Mun and his husband act sweet to each other and wondered why his parents didn't do anything similar.

His mother had held him in her arms, playing with his fine, dark hair, and answered his question. "I don't love your father, and he doesn't love me. That's why."

"T-then why are you mates?" Seokjin had asked, confused.

His mother stopped playing with his hair. She looked out the window, out at the great blue sky. "You wouldn't understand, Seokjin," she heaved a great sigh and sounded so very old. "It's a grown-up matter."

This only made him pout and cry, pounding his tiny fists on her lap until she finally gave in and told him the truth, putting it into words that he could partially understand.

"You remember when your father got mad at you for being pretty, remember? It's sort of about the same thing," she tucked a stray hair behind his ear, wiped away his tears with her thumb.

"Most pretty people can have babies, and I had you, didn't I? It made me weak in the eyes of so many advisers, my very ability to carry you. True alphas should not have wombs."

"What's a womb?" Seokjin had asked, blinking owlshly.

"What I carried you in," his mother smiled. "And you remember that your father's not pretty, right? He doesn't have one of those."

"So he's a true alpha!" Seokjin declared, catching on.

Queen Sumi winced. "Yes. To them, he is. So it made sense that he should be king. The only problem was that he was not the Crown Prince, like you are, Seokjin. He did not have the right to the throne, being only a cousin from a minor line."

"Then why is he king now?"

Sumi smiled, a brittle and yet angry thing. "He married the Crown Princess. Me. The advisors - those men in the funny hats who talk to your father - told me I had two options. I could marry your father and take the title of queen, or I could refuse to marry the marriage and be left with nothing when they sat him on the throne."

Seokjin tilted his head to the side. "I still don't get it," he complained.

His mother leaned her head back against her pillows, closing her eyes. "You will one day, Seokjin. Trust me. You'll understand soon enough."

And he did. As soon as Seokjin presented as an omega and the dreaded womb formed in his belly, he'd understood exactly what it was that made his mother marry and mate his father. She held onto her birthright in the only way she knew how, even if it meant she chained herself to a short life of scorn.

Most of the court laughed at his mother, a woman who couldn't even keep her mate in her own bed, couldn't satisfy him enough so that he would not go looking for others. And yet Queen Sumi had the last laugh.

Her husband built his little harem, made up of so many young omegas from court, the ones who laughed at Seokjin's mother. The mad king - who wasn't quite as mad at that point in time - spent countless heats with all of his concubines. Omegas were exceptionally fertile, so Seokjin should've had at least fifteen other half-siblings join him in the royal nursery.

None of them conceived.

Only Queen Sumi, the alpha woman that never went through a heat, bore the king an heir.

There was no way it was simply karma, or the gods' irony at play. Seokjin realized this later, once his mother had been cremated, ashes buried inside the family tomb, and the bastard boy named Taehyung was brought to the palace.

He asked Jae about it, wondering just what his mother had done to make sure of such a thing. He'd been newly presented, his position threatened for the first time by another heir, and wondered if he might one day have to put in place the same tricks.

Jae had stopped cutting Seokjin's hair, setting the scissors aside. His lips twisted into a frown. "What makes you think your mother did anything? Has someone said something to you?"

Just the other day, Mun Kai had been gossiping rather loudly about how strange it was that the late Queen Sumi's ghost hadn't made quick work of the new bastard.

Seokjin hadn't seen fit to mention this, however, as he'd suspected something long before Taehyung's appearance. "It just makes sense," he said.

Jae looked very uncomfortable, keeping his silence for a few more tense seconds. Seokjin tugged at his wrist, eyes going wide and watery. "Please, Jae!" he begged. "You're the only one that will tell me about her! I want to know!"

Jae relented, nodding shakily. "I don't want you to think any less of your mother for this," he said slowly. "But I'll tell you what I know."

Queen Sumi had summoned a witch to the palace and paid her for a curse. "You were the only son Sumi could bear. She protected your birthright the only way she knew how," Jae explained, looking guilty, as if he had had a part to play in this curse. "Any children conceived outside of their marriage bed would wither in the womb. That's why you are your father's only child."

"Until now," Seokjin said solemnly, thoughtfully. "But why did the curse not work for Taehyung?"

He asked this not out of malice, but curiosity. At first he thought it might be because his mother was dead now. Maybe the curse had died with her. But that only made sense if Taehyung was born

after she passed, which clearly wasn't the case. The boy was only three years younger than Seokjin himself.

"I don't know, Seokjin," Jae admitted, voice trembling. "I really have no idea."

To this day, Jin had no idea what made Taehyung the exception to the rule. Or at least he told himself this. Trying to understand the mystery, to remember what had happened when Jin was three years old - it was something too painful to bear.

Jin would not be looking for any witches to curse Joon any time soon. He didn't need someone else to do his dirty work. If Jin ever found out that Joon had touched someone else, he'd be happy to cut off the alpha's hands all by himself.

"Has the water done something to offend you?" a voice laughed.

Jin jumped, looking up to catch sight of familiar green robes. "Ru!" he blurted out, twisted grimace relaxing into an expression of surprise. "What are you doing here?"

"I don't know, Jin," Ru said airily. "What are you doing here?"

"Taking a bath, obviously," Jin rolled his eyes.

Ru put a finger to her lips, humming as if she was thinking rather hard. "In the middle of the day?" she asked.

Jin froze. She knew. But how -

"I brought you another set of clothes," Ru patted the hanbok that she held under her arm and set it beside the pool of water. Her nose wrinkled as she looked at the one Jin had discarded. "You'll certainly need them."

"Did you see us?" Jin asked, frightened that she knew too much

Ru smiled and shook her head. "Don't worry, Jin. I don't know who your new beau is. I just saw you coming here, reeking of an alpha with that silly grin on your face."

Jin frowned and lifted a hand to cover his mouth, astonished that he'd been betrayed by his own face.

"You won't tell anyone else, will you?" he asked, more of a plead than anything else.

"I don't see why they need to know," she responded softly, rubbing her own wrist. "Your love life is your own. I understand how you feel."

She gave him one last smile, ducked her head, and left. Jin was left puzzled, taken aback by Ru's sudden kindness and even what it was she really meant. It felt rather odd, but that was how Ru had acted as of late.

So he ignored it and let her leave, did not call out as he should have, asking her what she meant.

Perhaps then he could have stopped what happened next.

It was Jimin who smelled her first. This Jin would learn later, as the doctor conducted his examination and questioned who had been the one to clean her wounds. Jin had been oblivious to the smell, nose tucked in the crease of his pillow, so it had been the screams which woke him.

The last time he'd woken up to a woman screaming had been when Lady Hae was exiled from the palace. The shrill screeching that split Jin's ears was similar to Lady Hae's in that it came from a female omega, though the words uttered were far more foul than Hae would ever dare.

Jin remembered that he was angry, disgruntled. About ready to raise hell. He'd lifted his head from his pillow, opening one bleary eye as his face twisted into a scowl. Jin was ready to give whoever decided to interrupt his precious beauty sleep a proper tongue lashing, but whatever annoyance he felt left him in an instant once he saw the scene taking place in their quarters.

She was a mess. That was the only way to describe it. Her long braid had been undone, black hair mussed and covering her face. A bare spot on her scalp bled, the section of hair torn out. The omega wore next to nothing, whatever remained of her slip hung off of one shoulder, barely hiding a single breast from view.

Jimin gently wiped her chest off with a rag, dipping it back in a small bowl of water and ringing out the red. Bites and claw marks adorned her exposed breast, creating a trail up to her neck and down to her belly. Handprints littered her neck - dark, ugly things. And her thighs -

There was no way to describe it.

"Call for a doctor," Jimin ordered one of the scrawny boys, a stable boy named Minwoo. "I can't clean the rest of her until he confirms her condition."

Minwoo scurried off to do as he was bid. It was the first time Jin had seen him prove useful.

Jin heard a ringing in his ears, the sobs and screams fading away into the background. He swung his legs over the side of the bed and made his way over, still in a sort of disbelief. Jin called her name. She herself was silent, far too quiet. It was the others that yelled and cried for her sake.

She rose her head slowly. It appeared she heard him. Her mussed hair moved at the movement, revealing her face. Jin's heart stopped. His friend's face was a bloody, swollen mess. A hit to her right eye had forced it close, the surrounding skin swelling up as round and big as an apple, and her broken nose seemed mangled beyond repair. Tears soaked her face, but her left eye stared out at Jin, a blank and empty pit.

Ru opened her mouth - bleeding at the corner, no doubt torn - but no words came out. Jin wondered if she chose the silence, or the silence chose her.

Jin reached out a hand, perhaps hoping to comfort her in some way, but she flinched away, gaze turning wild, defensive. It was the sight of her body trembling, as skittish and frightened as a wild animal, that struck something in Jin.

He allowed it very rarely. Seokjin the prince did not care for people outside of his private circle, and in turn, people did not care for him. And yet now he was Jin the palace servant, and suddenly his circle was much bigger. The feelings had crept in silently, without warning, sinking their way into his heart and injecting a poison slowly, weakening him. Wasn't this one of the girls who'd bullied him, who'd called him and Jimin such horrible names and almost exposed his royal mark to the world? So why, now, did he feel anger for her sake, why did he want to cry and curse whoever had done this to her?

It was irrational. Stupid.

As feelings often were.

The physician arrived and confirmed what they already knew. He sighed once he saw Ru, as if the

whole thing was tiresome, too much of a hassle for him to deal with. But he dressed her wounds anyway, wrapping bandages around her head, neck and chest where the worst of it was.

“I’ll prepare a tea for her every day until the swelling goes down,” he nodded to the mess between her legs.

“Swelling?” Leah spat. “You call that swelling? He tore her open and yet you’re going to act like it’s nothing?”

The doctor glanced at her, narrowing his eyes. “Compared to most others, that is swelling. Something like this can’t be helped. She should count herself lucky. She’s not dead, is she?”

Leah wiped the snot from her nose angrily and looked away, resuming her tears.

The doctor tried to appear sympathetic, shrugging his shoulders. “It’s how these things go, yes? An unmated omega is a safety hazard in and of itself. Maybe the rest of you will learn something from this. No consorting with alphas and all that. I know Young Mistress Min will be dismayed to hear of such irresponsibility.”

Jimin had been cradling Ru’s head in his lap carefully, crooning at her gently. When he heard the doctor’s words, the crooning stopped. He looked up and met the physician’s gaze unflinchingly.

“What of contraceptives?” Jimin asked.

The doctor fumbled with his case. Finally, he said rather awkwardly. “That is...out of my hands, I’m afraid. Such medicine is forbidden for servants. It would only encourage fraternization.”

“Fraternization?” Jimin’s voice was incredibly high-pitched. He gestured to Ru’s broken body. “You said it yourself, doctor, this was clearly assault. Ru shouldn’t have to suffer any more than she already has. If she has to...to carry that monster’s spawn, then - “

“Jimin,” Jin spoke finally, careful and soft. “That’s enough.”

The room full of omegas and one beta turned to look at him, save for Ru who stared up at the ceiling, lost in her own world.

Jin bowed low and murmured his thanks to the doctor, dismissing him with praises. Rage was a pill he’d learned to swallow long ago. This doctor reminded him much of the one that had sold him out to Mun Kai. The difference now was that Jin had no jewels or coins to offer up in exchange for abortives and proper care. The beta before Jin was loyal to the very powerful people the omegas served. He would not stray for nothing.

So there was no use in arguing or cursing or crying. It would accomplish nothing.

Once the doctor left, Jin turned to Leah. She was glaring at him hatefully, as if she could not believe what she was seeing.

“How could you?” she started. “Ru is your friend, and you just let him walk out after treating her like that?”

“Who was Ru seeing?” Jin asked, ignoring her question all together. “Who did this to her?”

“Why should I tell you?” Leah spat. “You’ll just go and kiss his feet like the traitor suck-up you are!”

“You should tell me so that I can go slit his throat,” Jin said plainly.

It was not the response anybody seemed to be expecting. Leah opened her mouth, but no words would come out. Minwoo whimpered and looked away from Jin, curling into a ball on the floor as the other boy who shared his cot hugged him. Jimin’s hands trembled as he pet Ru’s hair gently, and the former gisaeng let out a laugh of disbelief.

“What are you talking about, Jin?” Jimin asked, incredulous.

“It’s exactly as I said,” Jin explained. “Ru’s attacker will see justice. I can assure you that.”

Leah lost the strength to stand, and she fell back against the wall, shaking her head. “He’s gone mad!” she laughed through her tears. “Hasn’t he?”

Jin tilted his head to the side. “Don’t you believe me?”

Jimin narrowed his eyes. “What can you do, Jin? You’re a servant, and an omega at that! How do you expect to get away with doling out the king’s justice?”

Jin’s lips curved up into a smile. “I never said I would do it alone.”

“No, no, no!” Leah protested, eyes wide and scared. “I never signed up for anything like this! That’s Lord Woo’s nephew we’re talking about!”

“Oh, so that’s who I need to seek out?” Jin dipped his head. “Thank you, Leah!”

He turned to leave, hand reaching out for the door knob. Something cold and clammy grabbed him before he could turn it, tightening around his wrist. Jin glanced over. It was Minwoo, the boy who’d brought the doctor back.

“Do you mean it? About getting him back for this?” he asked, voice wavering. His friend tugged at his shirtsleeve, urging him to let go of Jin, but Minwoo refused.

“Of course,” Jin said. “Ru’s my friend.”

It would not be the first time he paid an alpha back for their assault against an omega. If he could do such a favor for the traitor Min Yoongi years ago, then of course he would do it for Ru now. It did not matter if he was a prince or a servant. Jin refused to let such cruelty against one of his own go unchecked.

Jin looked at the other omegas. “Isn’t she yours, too?”

The two boys looked guilty, but Jimin wore a mask, his face unreadable. Leah, on the other hand, was angry.

“She is my best friend,” Leah hissed. “Don’t try and turn this on me, like I don’t care! I care more than any of you ever could! The two of us...we’ve been together for so long!”

She wiped at her tears, leaving red marks on her cheeks. “But getting revenge? We’ll just get ourselves killed, and who will take care of her then?”

“Not if we’re smart about it,” Jin argued. “It’s not like we’re going to run in there and stab the piece of shit! We’ve got to follow a plan if we want to get away with it!”

“This is happening really fast, though,” the boy holding Minwoo’s shirt said, looking like he might faint.

Leah's face twisted, anguish then anger, then back to anguish followed by anger all over again. She seemed to be at war with herself. The omega took one look at Ru, then looked away. "What kind of plan do you have?"

Good. She was coming around. Minwoo and the other boy seemed less reluctant as well. That only left -

"I refuse," Jimin said quietly.

"What," Jin said on reflex.

Jimin traced the bulbous welt along Ru's cheek through the bandages. His eyes never left her broken body. "The doctor was right about one thing," Jimin said. "This is how these things go. An omega is raped by an alpha, but they don't ever call it rape, do they? Assault, injury, attack, mating, service. There are so many pretty names because 'rape' is ugly, isn't it?"

"What will killing Lord Woo's nephew really do?" Jimin demanded. "Will it bring back Ru's virtue, stitch her body back together again?"

He looked up, perhaps for a response, but when he got none, all he could do was laugh. "You want justice not for Ru, but for yourselves. You want to make yourselves feel better about letting something like this happen to our friend. Maybe you think you'll redeem yourselves if you do."

"But you won't. If anything, you'll fail, and then Ru will have to face her attacker alone, carry his spawn alone. You'll accomplish nothing."

Jin's hands shook with rage. "What right do you have to speak to me that way?" he sputtered. "Should we just let him prowl the halls and pick out his next victim? Should we cower like the weak, little omegas people think we are?"

"I have every right, Jin. Especially when you're being as foolish as you are now. You don't really want to help Ru. You just want to cross another name off your list!" Jimin spat accusingly.

"List? What is he saying?" Leah asked, suddenly sounding scared.

"Don't presume to know what I want!" Jin narrowed his eyes. "I care about Ru, probably more than you!"

"You don't care about anybody but yourself! I know that now, I see it!"

"What are you talking about?" Jin's words were echoed in time by Leah, just as confused.

"Is Madam Yerin well, Jin? You never told me the two of you were still close," Jimin sneered.

Yerin? Jin had no idea why Jimin was no upset or even mentioning the madam now of all times. He opened his mouth, ready to shoot off even more questions, but a sob cut him off.

"Please, stop!" Ru begged, the first thing she said since her attack, Her broken fingers came up to cover her disfigured face, and she turned over, burying it in Jimin's midsection. "Stop fighting, I can't bear it!"

A hush fell over the room, interrupted only by Ru's sniffles. Jin felt his angry disappear, disappointment leaving him like a cloud as it faded. He felt empty now. Hollow and worn out.

"Sorry, Ru," he apologized, feeling like a scolded child.

Jimin murmured an apology of his own as Ru continued to tremble in his lap. Leah balled her hands into fists and rose. "Give her here!" she demanded. "You're not fit to take care of her now. Neither of you are. Obviously, there's something else that's bothering you. Get out and settle things. You're just making it worse!"

Minwoo gave a confident little huff, like he'd been in on the whole thing, while his friend shifted anxiously from side to side.

"Yeah," Minwoo put his hands on his hips. "You guys should just leave!"

The twin glowers from Jin and Jimin had him cowering, and he scampered over to hide behind Leah, who was gathering Ru in her arms. Leah rolled her eyes, but refused to budge on ordering the two out.

Jin would have to think long and hard on why he considered her a friend, it seemed.

But he followed Jimin out, and the door closed shut with a loud thump, echoing in the silence of the hallway. He and Jimin stared at each other for a moment.

"It's late," Jin stated the obvious. "Where should we go now?"

Jimin scowled and crossed his arms over his chest. "I don't know. How about we go and kill Woo Beomseok? That's what you wanted, right? You saw the opportunity to take down a Bangtan rebel and pounced."

"I saw the opportunity to help a friend," Jin sniffed. "I'm guessing you wouldn't understand. It must have been normal in the brothel to just sit by and let your friends be raped. I'm afraid I can't even pretend to have been a gisaeng from now on. The thought of it disgusts me."

"You have no idea what it means to be a gisaeng," Jimin said lowly. "No idea what really went on in that house. Perhaps if you did, you would have kept your distance from Yerin instead of becoming her friend."

Jin squinted. "Yerin's not my friend."

Jimin let out a laugh. "Really? Then why did I find her comb underneath your bed? Along with my papers?"

Jin squinted even harder. "Your papers?"

Oh. So it was Jimin's identity that Yerin borrowed for the false life she built Jin.

He tried very hard to understand just what it was that Jimin was so angry about, but came up with nothing. "What's wrong with me having her comb? Or your papers? Didn't know they were yours, by the way."

Jimin shook his head, looked around. "This isn't the place," he said finally.

Jin sighed and had to count to ten, because that's what he'd said from the beginning! "Fine, then," the kitchen servant grumbled. "The gardens!"

They slipped past one or two guards in order to make it outside, where not a soul was in sight. Once they were in the gardens, they hid behind a hedge and resumed their bickering as if it had never stopped.

“Why was killing Ru’s attacker your first thought?” Jimin asked helplessly, perhaps trying to wrap his mind around it.

“Because it’s what I do to those who hurt my friends,” Jin admitted. He blinked. “Why? What was your first thought?”

“Treating Ru. Getting her the proper help so that her future wouldn’t be ruined anymore than it already is.”

Jin pondered on it for a moment. “That was my second. I would have gotten my hands on some abortives once I finished with that asshole.”

The kitchen servant uncrossed his arms and tapped his chin thoughtfully. “And you’re telling me that you didn’t once think of killing him?”

Jimin remained silent, pensieve. Finally he repeated, rather regretful, “That was my second.”

The laughter built in Jin’s chest too quickly for him to contain it, and before he knew it, he was full-on giggling. Jimin’s lips twitched, and he stared at Jin, at a loss for words. The former gisaeng sniffled, looking terribly confused. It was only when Jin’s laughter turned into dry sobs that he understood it. This was Jin’s way of dealing with something beyond his control, how he processed his emotions instead of burying them inside. No tears fell from Jin’s face, and yet his stomach and chest were sore from crying.

Jimin gathered him in a hug, patting his back gently. “I’m sorry, Jin. For doubting you. I was so angry that I needed to blame someone. You were just so...calm. I thought the worst of you. I thought you were just using her situation, that you didn’t really care that she was hurting.”

Jin tilted his head, considering it. Jimin’s assessment wasn’t far off, at least for the Prince Seokjin from months ago. How quickly things could change.

“I had to be calm, Jimin. Calm, cool, collected. If I didn’t, I would have exploded,” Jin explained, taking Jimin’s smaller hand in his own. “Besides, you’re not that far off. Most of the time I really am that despicable. I’m sorry, too. I don’t understand what it means to be a gisaeng, what you had to go through. I didn’t know you hated Yerin so much, either. I would have told you what I knew about her if I’d known it was so important to you.”

“It’s not that it’s important,” Jimin sounded a little embarrassed. He rubbed at his nose. “And I don’t. Hate her, that is. It’s complicated. To be truthful, I found the papers and comb a month ago, I just...what happened to Ru brought back a lot of bad memories for me. Most of them associated with Yerin. Like I said, I lashed out at you.”

And oh, it certainly sounded complicated. Jin wanted to question him further, to ask for more details on the nature of his hostile relationship with Yerin, but now was not the time nor place. Jimin changed the topic before the silence could become awkward.

“You haven’t really killed people for hurting your friends, though, have you? You’ve just thought about it,” Jimin tried to assure himself.

“No, I haven’t!” Jin admitted truthfully. “Before it was for hurting my brother or acquaintances. I’ve never had any friends until now, you know!”

Jimin paled significantly. “Oh?”

Jin wrapped an arm around Jimin’s shoulders and led him back to their quarters, beginning to

regale him with the tale of the night he castrated Lord Min's uncle.

"Fine!" Jin announced to the room once they'd returned. "We won't be killing Woo Beomseok!"

"Then what do you propose we do?" Leah frowned. It seemed she'd convinced herself in the time Jin and Jimin had been gone.

"We should report it, right? It shouldn't be too hard. The doctor can back up our claims. He'll prove a little useful, at least," Jimin reasoned.

"What if we report it, and it just makes things worse?" Leah argued. "What if Beomseok gets mad and comes after her? I mean, I doubt any higher ups will care about what happened. If they punish anyone, it'll be Ru for not protecting herself better."

"That is one hundred percent what will happen," Jin predicted. "That's why I say we kill him."

In the old king's court, a rapist would be congratulated, given gifts and a pat on the back for his display of alpha dominance. The Bangtan court seemed more likely to merely turn the other cheek, neither celebrating nor punishing.

Jin himself had seen fit to send the victims out of the palace, a bag of gold coins in one hand and tansy in the other. It was the only apology he could give with the shadow of his father looming over him. Now that that shadow was gone, he wanted to do more, especially because it was Ru that this had happened to.

"What does Ru want to do?" Jimin asked finally.

Except the girl had already fallen into a fitful sleep during their absence, and no one wanted to wake her for fear that she would not be able to fall back asleep again.

Leah merely shook her head. "I doubt she'll even say. She refuses to speak to me."

Jimin crossed his arms over his chest. "I want to know what her wishes are before we do anything. She's the one who suffered. We should respect what she wants to do, even if it is nothing."

"So that's the plan for now?" Minwoo piped up. He'd been sitting in the corner, tucked in close to his friend as they watched the other omegas conversate. "Nothing."

"Seems so," Jin said, turning to smile at the two boys rather eerily.

He would not trust them with his plans, did not know these two strangers who shared the shame quarters. It was only Leah and Jimin he might confide in, and there was a slim chance of even that. Leah seemed too frightened, while Jimin's morals wavered. They were too pure to be stained so suddenly. It would have to be a slow, gradual soak.

"Do we know it's for sure Beomseok?" Minwoo frowned. "Or is that just Leah's theory?"

"Ru was seeing someone. She wouldn't tell me who," Leah admitted softly. "But she came back smelling like this awful, fishy scent. I've heard that Woo Beomseok is particular about his meals, that he eats nothing but fish for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. And Ru works for Hyewon, Lord Woo's granddaughter. It'd be easy for her to stop by Beomseok's rooms every now and then on her way to and from the Young Mistress's chambers. They're that close!"

Jin couldn't help but remember Lord Woo's nephew when he'd seen him last, the greasy smile on

the alpha's face as Jin did something as simple as bow, setting his dishes before him. Jin had a panic attack outside of the man's room where Joon found him, hadn't he?

"Did someone attack you? Was it Lord Woo's nephew?"

Why was it that Joon would come to such a conclusion in the first place, if not that it meant there was something to be feared from the man?

"The guy likes fish, so what?" Minwoo muttered.

"He'll just need to admit to it," Jimin hummed, "and then we'll know for sure."

"How, though? It'd be odd if we visited his chambers all of a sudden, wouldn't it? Not to mention dangerous!" Leah scoffed.

"Not for me," Jin said, voice like silk. "I've taken him his dishes before. If Ru will not speak of it, I'll learn the truth of the matter myself."

Though this wasn't really needed. The news of Ru's rape spread throughout the palace overnight, catching like wildfire. Jin heard one tale from Suran, while Leah heard another from a scribe she worked with. They all heard several other differing tales throughout the day, though each one held a single similarity.

Woo Beomseok, whose boasting of the servant he'd taken to bed on the cusp of a heat started the rumors in the first place.

Jin wondered, seething in his rage, how something could be so easy. Without even meaning to, he missed his appointment with Joon. By the time he realized it, it was already too late. He wondered if Joon would be upset with him, then dismissed it. Joon would understand, knew how important this must be to Jin, at least if he'd already heard the news.

It didn't help Jin's mood any that later that night, there was a knock on their door. One of Young Mistress Min's minions was there, clearing their throat obnoxiously and handing them a red slip with a smug smile.

"Servant Ru will have to report to her station tomorrow," the goblin announced. "Or else face expulsion from the palace!"

Leah ripped the slip out of her hands, slamming the door in her face. It took her two seconds to read it, another to rip the damned thing into shreds.

"That fucking bitch," she seethed. "She must have heard what happened, yet she expects Ru to get up and act like everything's fine! Especially when she has to go back to the Woo Clan's wing of the palace? Are you fucking kidding me?"

Ru shivered and ducked under her blankets to escape Leah's wrath, even though it wasn't aimed at her. Loud noises, whether it was a scream or a thud, frightened her awfully fierce now.

Jin sat back in his chair, steepled his hands together.

"Well, Jimin. It seems this isn't quite how we wanted things to go," he stated matter-of-factly.

Jimin ignored him and continued to nestle himself beside Ru's bundle of blankets, crooning and hugging her.

Minwoo and the other boy were outside of the room. Jin thought it was the perfect opportunity to come clean to his friends.

“Ru,” he spoke to her first. The shivering blankets stilled. “I’m going to kill Beomseok. That way you won’t have to worry over him anymore, ok? But if you don’t want me to, I’ll let him live. Just say the word.”

Jimin and Leah stared at him, mouths agape. Did they think Jin would abandon the plan, just like that? Jin waited patiently for Ru’s response. He’d give up only if she asked. The omega tugged her blankets down, nose and eyes peeking out at Jin.

“I don’t want you to get hurt, Jin,” she finally said.

“I won’t,” Jin promised. “Trust me, I know what I’m doing.”

Ru looked at him for a moment longer, before she jerked her head in a quick nod, then dove back under the covers. It was the only permission Jin needed. He rose from his seat and threw his tattered cloak on, the same one he’d worn when he’d stabbed Min Yoongi at the market.

“You’re serious about this,” Leah realized.

Jin turned back to look at her, a serene smile on his face. She flinched a little, and Jin wondered if his expression scared her. “Of course I am,” he said.

He met Jimin’s gaze next. The former gisaeng looked squeamish. Jin wondered how someone could be so strong and yet weak at the same time. He pitied Jimin for whatever it was that held him back. Death was a way of life, and some people needed helped along to the next stage of it.

It was one of the first lessons his father had ever taught him.

Beomseok was an easy man.

All Jin had to do was knock on his door, and he was let in. It helped that Jin’s face was flushed from the cold, and that he fluttered his lashes and parted his lips at the right moment. Beomseok was an older man, easily in his mid-thirties or early forties. Jin wondered just what it was about the man that had attracted Ru.

Maybe it was the money. As Jin looked around, he realized that Beomseok had plenty of it. Gold fixtures and plates, lavish green furnishings - Lord Woo’s nephew had it all.

“To what do I owe the pleasure?” he asked, sweeping in a dramatic bow.

Jin tittered, as if he found the gesture charming. He fanned himself and looked around. “Well, I would hate to just come out and say it. You wouldn’t happen to have any tea in here, would you?”

Beomseok grinned. “I would, actually!”

Jin clapped his hands together. “Perfect! Please, sit! I’ll get it ready and perhaps we can talk over tea. I have a rather...embarrassing request to make of you.”

They made small talk while Jin brewed the chamomile tea. Jin fawned over Beomseok’s room and riches, while Beomseok made sleazy comments here and there about Jin’s body. Jin didn’t think much of it, filing away anything the man said as useless chatter.

Then he caught something green peeking out from Beomseok’s sleeve.

“What’s that?” Jin pointed to it.

“Oh, this?” Beomseok lifted his arm up and rolled up his sleeve to expose the design of a green dragon, wings tucked by its side as it sprawled across his forearm. “The Woo family sigil. It’s something us Woos have picked up on, you see. We know how to stitch the ink into our skin so that it looks like the real thing, a magic birthmark. What do you think? It beats the Kims’ old bird, doesn’t it?”

It was a miracle that Jin had not shattered the empty teacup in his hand. “Haha,” he said weakly. “That’s amazing. Oh look, the tea’s ready!”

Beomseok snapped his fingers, letting the sleeve fall back down to cover the tattoo.

“I remember you now!” he declared, a gleam to his eye. “You’re that infamous kitchen servant. Jin, right?”

Jin paused, smiling so wide it hurt. “What do you mean?”

Beomseok leaned in across the table, breath close enough for Jin to breathe in. He smelled awful, like dirty sea water on a hot day. It took all Jin had not to gag. “You’re the omega the captain has his eye on.”

Jin couldn’t help it. The humor left his face, leaving a blank slate behind. He hadn’t expected this. “Which captain?” he asked, playing dumb.

Beomseok scoffed and leaned away. “Joon, of course! What other captain would I speak of?”

Jin felt uneasy, suddenly doubting how easy of a target Beomseok actually was. How much did this man know? He decided to lay his cards on the table. This man would be dead soon anyways, and dead men tell no tales.

“What do you know about the captain and I?” Jin questioned

Beomseok’s eyes swept over Jin’s body, making the omega feel dirty. “I know that you look different. More sensual. Relaxed. You must have finally experienced a man’s touch. I’m guessing it was Joon, right? He likes to take you on those nice little walks, doesn’t he? Joon always did fancy himself a romantic.”

“Are the two of you friends or something?” Jin wondered, voice tight.

Beomseok laughed. “Far from it. I absolutely hate him. It’s always Joon this, Joon that with my uncle. You’d think he was the guy’s actual son and not some charity case!”

The panic in Jin’s mind was replaced with a burning curiosity, and his gaze quickly turned calculating.

“Why did your uncle decide to take Joon in? He’s not of noble blood, is he?”

At this, Beomseok merely sent him a pitying look, shaking his head with a sigh. “You don’t know then? Poor thing.”

He reached out, grasping Jin’s chin in his hand. His fingers dug into the side of Jin’s cheek, and the scar there began to itch. Jin accepted his touch, if only for the information he might get.

“Lover boy’s engaged. He’ll marry into a family whose shit is worth more than you could make in

your entire life here.”

Jin’s heart stopped beating. His fingers curled around the teapot by his side, welcoming the burning warmth. “You’re lying,” he protested.

Because what did Beomseok know? Who was this hideous creature to talk about what Jin had with Joon, the fledgling thing that he himself did not quite understand? He shouldn’t be upset, though, especially not now, when he had important things to do.

Beomseok continued, grip turning painful as he droned on and on.

“You probably already had an idea of it yourself. I mean, why would Joon bother with someone like you in the first place? A pitiful, needy omega. Don’t worry. That’s why you’re here for me now, isn’t it?”

His mouth hovered over Jin’s own, and the awful smell was back again, burning his eyes and throat.

It’s ok if Joon’s using me, was all Jin could think. I’m using him, too.

Jin pushed Beomseok away. “You’ve got it wrong, asshole. I’m here for Ru.”

Then he poured the scalding tea across Beomseok’s face.

Beomseok screamed, an awful, high-pitched thing, and clutched at his face. Jin watched as the red burn formed across his face, as he tried to pry his eyes open but gave up. Jin sat back, hands folded across his lap, and leaned out of the way when Beomseok then decided to reach out for him, making wild, grabby motions as the skin on his face melted.

“I just don’t understand. If you were courting her, then why did you rape her?” Jin asked, deathly calm.

“I didn’t rape her!” Beomseok growled, putting off a heavy smell of distress and aggression. “That little bitch wanted it. She was giving me eyes all day long, then when I’m finally going to give her what she wants, she plays the shy maiden? I’d already fucked her once. What’s one more time?”

“Disgusting,” Jin muttered. He threw the pot down, clay shattering into all sorts of different sized shards. He pushed his sleeves up.

Beomseok’s eyelids fluttered, and he squinted, perhaps trying to catch glimpse of Jin as he reached out with his fists. “You won’t get away with this, you whore!” Beomseok swore.

Jin picked up the sharpest piece of clay he could find. It would have to work. He’d make it work. “I’m afraid I already have. Woo Beomseok, that clumsy oaf, was brewing himself a cup of tea when he fell on top of it and impaled himself on a shard of clay. How unfortunate.”

“You really think they’ll believe that story?”

Jin stood beside him, readied his fist. “They won’t need to. No one will care enough to question it.”

Beomseok’s eyes flew open, red and swollen, just as Jin pushed the shard inside his throat. Blood spurted out, warm and wet as it coated Jin’s hand. Jin placed his other hand behind Beomseok’s head gently, the mockery of a lover’s caress, only to use his hold to push the clay further inside. It was not nearly enough punishment for what he’d done to Ru, but it would have to do.

Because this wasn’t about making him suffer. It was making sure that he died and stayed dead, so

that Ru would not have to worry about him bothering her anymore. If Jin had all the time and power in the world, he would drag this out, maybe cut parts of the man off until he was begging for the sweet release of death.

Bu he did not have all the time and power in the world. Not anymore.

It lasted a few minutes, but felt like an eternity. Finally, Beomseok gave one final twitch, the muscles in his throat spasming, body stilling. Jin let go of him, and he fell to the floor, on top of the mess of clay shards. Jin's hands did not tremble as he wiped them on his cloak, bundling it into a ball so that the red splotches were hidden. He'd have to get rid of it somehow, since he couldn't risk being seen washing it.

Jin glanced over at the fireplace and made his decision.

It would burn.

His hands were mostly clean, only a little blood remaining around his fingernails and in between the lines of his palms. Jin took one final glance around the room as he waited for the cloak to finish burning, making sure there was nothing too out of place besides the corpse on the floor.

Jin's eyes caught on Beomseok's arm one final time, the green dragon wings gleaming in the firelight. The phoenix on his back itched in discomfort, as if the mark itself felt challenged. He was burning, aching to know it. The art of tattooing that Beomseok mentioned, the colorful patterns the Woos knew how to carefully stitch, could it really be what he thought it was?

Anyone could claim to be a rightful Kim, Jin thought. If they found the right artist to fix them up.

The kitchen servant shut the door behind him carefully, so as to not make any noise. He did not feel victorious or even regretful. Instead he felt a sense of peace, the outrage that had thrummed through his veins disappearing.

There. That wasn't so hard.

He made sure to evade the guards posted at the ends of long corridors, having memorized their patrol patterns and how to avoid them long ago. Jin made it back to the omegas' quarters, sure that he had not been seen by anyone.

Minwoo was there when he got back, and both Ru and Leah had fallen asleep. "Did you finish those dishes for Lady Jeon?" Jimin asked, watching him with a warning in his eyes, chest resting on his knees as he sat huddled on his bed.

Jin sighed. "Yes. There was a problem, though. I spilled the wine. Now my hands are stained."

He spread them out, making a grand show of it. Jimin's face paled, and he blinked, perhaps taken aback by Jin's callous display. It seemed Jimin didn't know that those who acted the most suspicious were the most likely to be caught. There had to be no doubts, no uncertainty. The mad king might have taught Jin how to kill, but it was Adviser Paek who taught him how to get away with it.

Minwoo gave him a glance, but otherwise paid him no mind. Jin couldn't help but wonder if he would be a problem in the future. "You should probably clean them then, right?" Jimin noted.

"Of course," Jin rolled his shoulders. "I was going to. I just needed to gather an extra set of clothes before I headed for the baths."

There would be no Ru to help him out this time.

More excitement awaited them the next day. The palace was alive with talk of Woo Beomseok once more, but this time it focused on how the rapist had met an unfortunate end the night before. Some servants claimed he'd been poisoned, while others insisted it was an early stroke.

"You know anything, Jin?" Suran asked as they washed dishes together, raising an eyebrow.

"Not anymore than you," Jin shrugged his shoulders.

"Of course you don't!" Suran sighed. "You're always the last to know these things, it seems. Well, I'll just say that I'm glad he's gone! I hated bringing him his dishes. He had this awful vibe to him, and if what he did to that omega is true, then he had it coming."

"I couldn't agree more," Jin insisted, frowning. "But do you know what really happened to him?"

Suran paused, setting one of the dishes to the side. She looked around, then leaned in to whisper, "Murder, most definitely. But the Council has ruled it an accident! They don't want too much excitement before the king's coronation in two months' time."

"Interesting," Jin hummed.

A boy appeared to his left, twisting a dish rag in his hands rather nervously. "J-jin, right?" he asked. "There's...someone here to see you."

"Tell them they can wait," Jin snorted, not paying him any mind. He gestured to the stack of dishes. "Don't you see how much work I have to do?"

"I can't tell him that!" the boy gasped. "He's not someone you can say no to!"

Jin slapped his washcloth against the bin and whirled around. "Oh? And just who is this Mr. High and Mighty, that they can't wait until I'm done?"

The boy shifted from one foot to the other. "C-captain J-Joon," he stuttered out.

And just like that, Jin's expression relaxed, eyes widening and mouth going slack. He grabbed the towel that hung from Suran's apron, ignoring her protests, and dried his hands with it. "Alright," he conceded. "Show me to Captain Joon."

The boy led him out, scurrying along. Jin wondered if Joon might be mad at him for missing their meeting yesterday, if he had called him out to demand an explanation. However as soon as he saw the alpha leaning against the corridor wall, he knew he wasn't angry. Just confused.

It was like some sort of empathetic instinct, reading Joon's emotions at a glance.

"Thank you," Joon nodded to the boy, dismissing him.

"Joon," Jin started, then trailed off. He found that he didn't really know what to say.

"I wanted to talk to you about yesterday," Joon murmured.

"I didn't mean to forget about our meeting!" Jin insisted. "There was just a lot going on yesterday. One of my friends - "

"Ru, right?" Joon interrupted. He uncrossed his arms, reaching out to grab Jin's wrist. The omega

allowed it, a little confused.

Joon lifted his hand up to his face and gave a little sniff. “Ah,” he said, as if that explained it. He let Jin’s hand drop to his side. “So it *was* you.”

Jin felt as if he had been caught somehow. “What do you mean, Joon?” he asked, laughing a little to diffuse the sudden tension in the air.

It didn’t work. Joon just stared at him, golden eyes dark with something Jin couldn’t name. “You killed Woo Beomseok,” he accused, voice a hushed whisper. “The chamomile scent is there, but just barely.”

“Woo Beomseok was killed?” Jin exclaimed in mock-surprise.

Joon grabbed him by the shoulder, pushed him up against the wall. Perhaps it was strange for Jin’s only thought to be: *He could have pushed me harder.*

“I told you once, Jin, but it seems it needs repeating. I want you to be honest with me. There’s no need to pretend. I see you,” Joon insisted, voice straining.

Oh, darling. If I was honest, I’d be dead, Jin thought. He stared at Joon, cocking an eyebrow as his eyes gleamed.

“I don’t think you could handle me at my worst, Joon,” the omega challenged.

Joon growled and ripped his glove off so quickly that Jin hardly saw it happen. He bared his rough, uneven skin and brushed it up against Jin’s neck. The servant keened, tilting his head to the side so the alpha could have better access. Joon took advantage of it and pushed his fingers down, passed the high collar of his uniform. The high collar had come in handy, hiding the hickies from the other day in the gardens.

“I think I could handle you just fine,” Joon claimed.

The feel of Joon’s scarred skin felt heavenly against Jin’s own, especially when he reached Jin’s scent glands, caressing them carefully, lovingly.

“Did you see it?” Jin asked, sounding gleeful. “It wasn’t nearly as messy as I had hoped it might be.”

“You’re a terror, Jin,” Joon said fondly, before he went in for a kiss. “But yes, I saw it. I was the first to find it, you know.”

Jin felt like Joon might eat him alive. The alpha no longer blushed after each kiss. Instead he seemed to take pride in how he took Jin apart, pulling away to admire the omega’s flushed cheeks and teary eyes. He did not shy away nor demand submission from Jin, who was one of the least docile omegas in the world. Instead Joon acted like he wanted to tear him open, to peer at Jin’s black, inky insides and see him at his worst.

It was exhilarating.

“Oh? How?” Jin wondered.

Joon wrapped his other arm around his waist and pressed his nose in Jin’s hair. “One of my servants happened to see you coming out of Beomseok’s room and reported it to me. They’d said you looked fine, but I thought the worst anyways. I went over to confront Beomseok, but when I

got there - “

“He was already dead, huh,” Jin finished, a lazy smirk painted on his face. He took a deep breath and sighed, nearly drunk off of the pheromones in the air. The smell was on him now, a result of the brief scenting. It was crisp and musky, so warm that Jin felt hot all over.

The omega wanted so badly to feel Joon’s gaze on him, hot and searching as he saw Jin’s ugliness. He wanted to bare his teeth and see if the alpha could fight just as good as everyone said.

But they were in the middle of a hallway. They should not be doing anything of the sort. The fire in Jin died out, and he pushed Joon away gently, so that he did not think Jin was angry or scared.

“If you know, then are you here to arrest me, Captain?” Jin murmured. He stared at Joon cautiously.

“I should,” Joon looked conflicted. He tugged his glove back on. “But I won’t. I only wish that you hadn’t done it. Beomseok was due for a trial in a week. We would’ve dealt with him then.”

Jin scoffed. “You probably would have let him go with a slap on the wrist. I know how these things work.”

“It doesn’t matter now, though, does it? Because we’ll never know. Everyone deserves a trial, Jin. It’s only fair,” Joon insisted.

Jin rolled his eyes, looking away. “How foolish,” he muttered. “Ru couldn’t have waited that long.”

“How is she?” Joon’s tone turned concerned. “If she needs anything, just ask it of me.”

“She’s doing better now that she doesn’t have to worry about Beomseok,” Jin sniffed. “And she has all of the other omegas to take care of her...it’s just...”

“Just what?” Joon asked, frowning.

Jin fidgeted. “The doctor wouldn’t give us any herbs...in case something unwanted comes along later down the line. Could you help me with that?”

Understanding dawned on Joon’s face. “Of course!” he agreed readily. “How much - or I suppose, what exactly would you need?”

How perfect. Jin hadn’t expected him to agree. What would make it even better was if Jin himself could gather the herbs.

“I’d have to see it to know for sure,” Jin murmured. “Do you think you could allow me to see the doctor’s stock sometime?”

“We’ll go tomorrow,” Joon promised him, holding Jin’s hand in his own. He brought it up, pressing a kiss to the back.

Jin couldn’t help but smile, pleased at how things had turned out for him. It would be so easy to distract Joon, to slip some other medicines and herbs inside his pocket while he was at it.

“Same time as usual?” Jin teased, letting go of Joon’s hand reluctantly.

“Always.”

Jin caught Jimin in the hallway outside their quarters, eager to share the good news. “You won’t believe it, Jimin! I can get some medicine for Ru!”

He stopped, staring at the knapsack that Jimin carried. “Where are you going?”

Jimin winced, his face pale and lips dry. “I’m due for a heat soon. I’m surprised you didn’t smell it on me. Mistress Min won’t allow me to stay and stink the palace up for a week. I agreed, only because it might trigger one in the others. Then she’d be down six workers instead of just one. That and - well, I didn’t want to upset Ru.”

Jin nodded, though he felt a little let down that he would not see Jimin for a week. “Makes sense,” he sighed. “I’ll be lonely without you, though.”

Jimin smiled weakly. “I know. But what about you?”

Jimin’s words seemed out of place and yet so very ominous.

“What?” the kitchen servant asked. “What do you mean? What about me?”

Jimin furrowed his brows, lips forming into a gentle pout. “Your heat, obviously. You haven’t had one since you got here, have you? Unless you hid away for a whole week without me knowing about it.”

Jin had to think about it. It was something that had crossed his mind in passing, never on the forefront but always skirting the edge. He’d feared a heat, so he’d made himself starve. Then when he started to eat again, the fear had been buried by other worries, like that of Joon’s attentions and Ru’s attack.

When was his last heat? Surely it hadn’t been...

“Before I entered the palace,” Jin said slowly, the realization dawning on face. “I...can’t remember anything after that. I don’t, I don’t know how I forgot.”

Jimin looked rather alarmed now. “What about your menstruation? Surely you’ve bled since your last heat, yes?”

Jin blinked. “No,” he said shakily, hunching his shoulders. He felt small and ashamed, like he was the biggest idiot that ever lived, because how could he forget about something like this? How could he not time his cycle and worry over it, as every good omega did?

“Should I be worried?” Jin asked, because Jimin’s knuckles had turned white as he clenched the side of the doorway in his hand, and his eyes were wide.

Jimin let out a deep breath after a moment, then shook his head. “Don’t. Your time will come. Your body’s just probably adjusting. You said you were on suppressants for a long time before, yes? Then you’re probably just...getting used to things without them. But...”

He trailed off, perhaps afraid of what he was about to say.

“But what?” Jin insisted, desperate to know the truth Jimin might be withholding.

“You should bleed soon. If not, you won’t go through another heat. That would mean - “

Jin interrupted, trying very hard to stop his hands from shaking. “That I can’t bear children? I might

be a little slow when it comes to these things, Jimin, but I'm not stupid."

Perhaps he sounded a little too harsh, but an eerie sense of horror had taken over his senses. He didn't understand why he hadn't noticed the absence of bleeding. Jin wasn't used to menstruating regularly. It was new and foreign to him. The last time he had bled was that night so many years ago when he first presented. There was no way that he was pregnant, however.

He might never have to worry over pregnancy scares. What followed this realization was a muddled mix of relief and disappointment. Jin would not have to see his body grow distorted and even more feminine as it cradled life inside of it, and yet his lack of fertility meant he was lacking not just as an omega, but as a prince.

No one would want to mate an omega who could not bear children. That was the whole point of them, their reason for living. What was Jin without his womb? And what of the crown, the Kim dynasty? There was no one else left alive, no matter what the Bangtan Four said about their impostor's claim to the lineage.

And if Jin could not bear offspring...it meant he was the last of his kind. There would be no more Kims of noble birth, no more babies born with phoenixes magically seared onto their skin.

The thought was harrowing. He felt, for the first time in a long while, very alone because of it.

"Jin," Jimin started, but Jin raised a hand to stop him.

The kitchen servant shook his head. "Leave it," he said, sounding stronger than he felt. "It's fine...I'll be fine, Jimin. Good luck with your heat."

Jin left before Jimin could get another word in, entering their quarters and shutting the door behind him. Once he saw there was no one else in the room, he leaned back against the door and closed his eyes. Jin brought one of his hands up slowly, pressing it to his belly, as if he might be able to feel whatever was wrong inside of him. Another thought came to him for some reason, perhaps more terrifying than all the rest.

He wondered what Joon might think of his failure, whether he'd want him now or not.

Chapter End Notes

hey :))) it didn't take me more than month to update this time!!! and we're making progress!!! you guys don't know how badly i want to get to this reveal lol it's killing me!! :^)

also i hope this chapter cleared up some of the confusion in regards to jin's mother's status. she was indeed an alpha, but a very feminine, pretty one.

as always, please leave kudos/comments and feel free to follow my [twitter](#) for updates on rising sun's progress!! i also occasionally have polls for what readers want to see next if that's not enough incentive to follow me lmao

I will make sure to respond to comments this time!!! sorry i've been such crap at it lately!! I really do appreciate each and every comment that this fic gets!!

Resounding Nuptials

Chapter Summary

Jin tries to ignore what he really wants. Joon takes him to a shop. Everyone receives startling news.

Chapter Notes

ok i don't know how i managed to get this chapter out this fast but i literally just came home from college tonight, sat down and finished it in one setting...if it sucks then that's why!! sorry guys lmaooo

warnings: menstruation, implied/reference noncon

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Winter came full-force, and yet still Jin remained bloodless and heatless. He wondered if it was the weather, the cold winter winds that pressed in on the palace, whistling through the hallways and blowing out fires. It was normal for heats not to come in the winter, which was the least favorable time to conceive. It was spring when most went through their one of their thrice-yearly ruts or heats. Jin himself had been conceived in the spring, his existence a miracle between the infertile pairing of two alphas.

The harvest had been less than plentiful due to the Uprising, but even if it hadn't been for the political strife, they would have had to resort to rationing. It was just how winters went. Jin had regained his appetite over the last few months, but only just enough that he became full after eating his own portion of food. His stomach had begun to cramp as of late, perhaps unsettled by the full meals he was eating.

Jin bitterly wondered if it was the self-imposed starving that had withered his womb, or something else entirely.

"Why the long face?" Suran asked him, handing one of the plates she'd finished drying to the young, nervous servant by her side. "We're both been promoted! You should be happy!"

The head chef had just told them they would move on from dishwashing to actually cooking food, provided they trained the new servants properly. Yoongi's cousin had brought on nearly twice as many trainees as there were actual servants. All of them were skinny, sickly things eager for any scrap of food or warm place to sleep they could get.

"Just tired of winter already," Jin sighed.

It was odd, how something he once considered a blessing was now a curse.

"You're telling me!" Suran shivered dramatically. "I can't sleep worth a damn most nights. It's too cold! And the food? Pah! They've cut our portions into a third of what they once were!"

The young servant beside her widened their eyes, as if they thought it impossible that their meals might be larger than what they already were.

“Truly terrible!” Jin agreed wholeheartedly. He did not bring up that what they were getting now was still more than the scraps from what seemed like so long ago. There was no Joon around most days to complain about the situation, as he was busy with training soldiers and other state matters. Their meetings had been reduced to once a week if they were lucky, and when they did see each other, Jin didn’t want to waste their time whining about food.

It made Jin feel a little lonely and reminded him of just far out of reach Joon was.

In another lifetime, Jin thought, but stopped himself before he might entertain such dreams.

The day continued much the same, but after they finished their shift, showing the trainees the final rounds of dishes that had to be cleaned, Suran pulled Jin aside.

“You’re friends with Jimin, yes? The pretty dancer that works for Lady Jeon?”

Anyone who recognized Jimin from the festival two months ago referred to him as such. There’d been several servants eager to see Jimin perform again, perhaps just for a small crowd of only servants, but the omega refused.

“I danced then only because I was forced to,” Jimin admitted. “Any dance I freely give is reserved for the one I love.”

It was corny and ridiculous, and Jin had to snort once he overheard his reasoning. This was coming from Jimin, the very same omega who had just come back from a heatweek away smelling like some strange alpha. Jin felt outraged simply for his brother’s sake. Once he had confronted Jimin about it, the other man rolled his eyes, as if Jin was the stupidest person who had ever lived.

“There’s a difference between fucking and making love,” he’d said snidely, “and I, for one, don’t want to suffer and wring myself dry like you.”

Jin chalked it up to the fact that Jimin was hormonal.

That was the only reason he didn’t slap the omega for his disrespect.

A slight distance had formed between them as a result, and though they didn’t hate each other, they just didn’t talk as much as they used to. He’d thought they’d moved passed whatever wall it was that Yerin’s existence had formed, but it seemed Jin was wrong about that. Still, the omega found himself nodding to Suran’s question.

“Yeah, what about him?”

Suran grimaced. “I’ve heard there’s a guard who’s been following him a lot recently. Trying to anyways. Apparently your friend spent a heat with him and hasn’t come calling like he expected.”

Great, Jin thought. *Do I have to clean up another mess?*

He let out a long, deep sigh. “I’ll let him know. Thank you for warning me, Suran.”

Suran merely smiled. “Don’t mention it. I’m your friend, and I know how you omegas like to look after each other.”

Jin paused, glanced at her. She was still smiling, but there was a sort of glint to her eyes. Surely,

she didn't know? He shook his head, ignored it, and left.

When he told Jimin about Suran's warning, the other just hummed in response. "Got it," he said. "I'll be sure to watch out."

The callous dismissal pissed Jin off, but he let it go. His time as a servant had taught him that sometimes it paid to be the bigger person, at least in the moment. There was a sort of restless energy building up in him, a fire that he hadn't felt in a long time. Jimin's coldness combined with Joon's absence annoyed him. He'd grown used to having people there for him, but now all of a sudden they were gone.

It was an awful feeling.

He made his way over to Ru's bed, content that she would not brush him aside. "Ru," he crooned. "You won't be mean like Jimin, will you?"

Ru poked her nose out from under the blankets. Her face was mostly normal now, only a few scars here and there. When she'd first cried about the marks, Jin had sat with her all night, rubbing his nose into her neck and assuring her that she'd still be pretty, because Jin had a scar but he was still the most handsome man in the world.

She shook her head now, smiling softly, and gestured for Jin to climb on top of her cot. It was a tight squeeze, but Jin felt warm and fuzzy.

Leah scoffed from the next cot over, braiding her long hair loosely. "She's mean to me! Ru glared at me when I asked if I could sleep with her tonight!"

"What can I say, Leah? Your face isn't as charming as mine," Jin sighed, closing his eyes and breathing in the sweet, warm smell of a friendly omega.

A pillow hit him in the back, but Jin ignored it. Envy breeds jealousy, and all that.

In the morning his irritation quelled, a good night's sleep doing wonders for his poor mood. Jin quickly dressed and readied himself for the day, fingering the hair on the nape of his neck. He was due for another cut.

As he left their quarters, he nearly ran over one of the messenger boys.

"Sorry, sir!" the boy squeaked. "I was waiting for you! I have a message."

Jin smiled at the boy and held out his hand, thanking him. He knew that handwriting anywhere. It was Joon's.

The alpha wanted to visit the markets today, later in the afternoon. He'd requested Jin specifically, excusing him from his second shift of the day. To most it was no big deal. Captain Joon was a gentleman, a noble gentleman, and Jin had been sent to the markets for groceries before, so he knew his way around. Their courtship was a fragile, secret thing, though Jin sometimes felt like he wanted to dig his teeth into Joon's neck and shout from the rooftops that the alpha was his.

Instincts, he chided himself. *Nothing more or less than biology at its finest.*

Joon was kind and attentive, all that Jin could ever want in an alpha.

And yet he had not forgotten his true purpose for playing along with the captain's games.

Joon was the East Pillar of the Bangtan Four, representing the traitorous Woos who claimed to be dragons. He'd had a part to play in Jin's downfall, and it was that which the omega could never forgive.

All of the kisses and gentle touches in the world could not make up for the disgrace that Jin had to face that fateful day.

"You must make sure every plate, piece of silverware and cup is put back in place," Jin instructed his two pupils. He finished the plates he was cleaning and set them in their respective crates. Then he grabbed one of the sudsy knives and offered it to the boy on his left.

"Now you try," he encouraged.

The boy's hands were shaky, showing his nerves, but he cleaned it carefully until the silver shined spotless and put it back in the proper crate. Jin nodded his head, and he cleaned several more dishes, then put them away in the right places. Jin clapped his hands together.

"Perfect!" he cheered, to which the young boy flushed, proud. "I'll watch from now on. Hands-on learning is the way to go, you know."

Jin did just that, though his hand crept inside the crate and curled around the handle of the clean knife, pulling it out slowly to slip inside his sleeve. "Help him out, Hana," he said, making sure the girl was distracted.

"Do you know why it's important everything is put back?"

"Because we'll get in trouble?" the boy asked.

"Basically," Jin nodded. "They take inventory each night, so if something's missing they'll come looking for you."

How perfect it was, that he show these newbies the ropes today. They made the perfect scapegoats for Jin, who had never lost a dish in his entire time at the palace.

Jin tucked the knife inside leather, then strapped it to his forearm before he met up with Joon in the barren, brown gardens. He wondered if the alpha might smell the leather and metal on him, but Joon did not have the best nose in the world and so it went unnoticed.

Jin hugged him tightly, breathing in that heavy smell that he'd come to lo- no, admire. Not many alphas smelled this good. Just Joon. He was warm, too, and Jin did not think he could tolerate hugs from any other alpha, even if his body warmth depended on it.

"I've missed you," Joon rumbled. "It seems like an eternity since I last held you."

"It was just last week, you sap!" Jin laughed, placing a hand on Joon's rosy cheek. He wondered how long the alpha had been waiting in the cold. "But I know, I feel the same way. I was in a horrible mood yesterday, you know."

"Because you missed me?" Joon teased.

Jin rolled his eyes and pushed him away slightly. "No, you dolt!"

Joon looked terribly sad, eyes wide like a puppy as he pouted, and so Jin sighed. "Well, maybe.

But it wasn't just that! Everyone's been in a foul mood as of late. I can't stand that sort of negativity right now. It's annoying."

"Maybe you're the one who's annoying them, dear," Joon suggested innocently enough, though he knew exactly what it was he was doing. "Have you ever thought of that?"

Jin narrowed his eyes and crossed his arms. "Well! That's the last time I tell you about my life I suppose!"

He puffed out his cheeks, nose pointed to the sky, and turned as if to walk away. "I'll just let you walk to the market by yourself if I'm that annoying!"

"Come on, Jinnie, you know I don't mean that!" Joon wrapped an arm around his waist, bringing him close. "You know how much I like to tease you."

Jin shivered at the warm breath that spilled down his neck, heating him up about a hundred degrees. He thought of the library two weeks ago and Joon's uncovered hands, the way the light and shadows had splayed across the desk, candle flickering in time with their short, heavy breaths as Joon cleared the desk to make room for Jin. He'd set the omega on top and hovered his hand above Jin's lower half, silently asking for permission. Once Jin nodded, Joon had lifted Jin's skirts and taken off his own gloves, then set to work.

He'd certainly taken his time teasing Jin that night.

The omega flushed, looking away. "Yes, I know. But today's not about that sort of teasing, I hope. I mean, we're going to the market and all..."

He trailed off. Joon grinned wolfishly. "You're right, love. It's not."

Jin raised an eyebrow. "And what do you expect to find at the market, other than coal or firewood?"

"Just wait and see, Jin! It's a surprise," the alpha insisted.

The market itself wasn't very surprising. Jin had expected there to be very few people there. Most vendors shut themselves inside for the winter, especially if they didn't have any food to sell at this time of year. It was only the butcher and lumberjacks who came to market during the winter, and even fewer who came to buy from them.

"Indeed. I'm surprised, but only because you've failed to surprise me," Jin declared. He wrapped his winter coat, which was a gift from Joon, around him tighter.

Joon merely shook his head and tugged him along further. They passed several small bundles on the sides of the streets. Joon tipped coins into each cup he saw.

"You're a kind man, Joon," Jin murmured.

Joon smiled tightly. "I'm not that kind, Jin. Gold doesn't fill bellies. If anything, I'm cruel."

Jin hook his arm through Joon's, leaning on his side. "You're kinder than most," he said quietly. "I think that says a lot."

The knife on Jin's other arm poked at his skin, as if reminding him of his duty here today. A man like Joon was rare to find. A good, kind man. It was a shame he'd have to die.

They walked for a few minutes more, until finally they came to a shop. The sign outside was written in some kind of Western writing, so Jin didn't even bother trying to figure out what it said. "Foreigners are setting up shops now, huh?" he commented.

"Of sorts."

When they entered, Jin understood completely what Joon's cryptic words meant. The business wasn't a typical shop. It seemed more like a home, with long, billowy drapes strewn everywhere and push cushions and furniture set here and there. The air smelled sharp, like mint, and it felt like there was a static buzz whirring in Jin's ears. It felt like a warning.

In the back of the shop, in front of a crackling fireplace, was the owner. She was a darker woman with short hair, lips painted red and eyes a smoky purple. She wore a long and flowy Western dress that shimmered in the firelight. The woman placed her chin on her hand. Her nails were red and impossibly long, just like claws. She was dangerously beautiful, and Joon knew her well enough to call her by name.

"Jessi," Joon greeted. "This is - "

"I know who he is," the woman declared, voice husky. She tilted her head, as if Jin and her were in on some sort of joke. "Jin, right?"

She leaned back in her seat, closing her eyes as she took a deep breath. "I can sense it in you," she sighed. "That aura. Oh, you poor thing."

"Jessi," Joon warned. "Enough with the fatalistic talk please."

Jin blinked, wondering just what Joon had walked him into. Was she a shaman or a witch? The last time Jin had met a witch was -

Pain splintered in his head, black circles dotting his vision. He couldn't remember what he was trying to remember. Jessi's response took his mind away from the wall he'd unknowingly stumbled upon.

"My apologies," she said, sounding not sorry at all as she blew a stray strand of hair out of her face. "Joon! What are you here for if not my prophecies?"

Joon rolled his eyes. "The front of your business. You know, the thing you mostly sell. Jewelry."

"Oh," Jessi looked a little put out. "Yeah."

She gestured in front of her, where several cases were spread out. "Necklace, earrings, rings, or bracelets? Oooh, what about an anklet? Those are in style overseas lately."

Joon looked to Jin. "Well, which do you want?"

Jin blinked, color rising to his cheeks. "That's what we're here for?"

He felt himself relax. He'd thought...well, he'd been a little worried. Maybe it was the whole paranormal thing, the magic that he'd sensed which threw him off.

Joon tugged at his scarf. "I wanted to make sure I got you something you liked," he admitted bashfully.

Jin's heart warmed. "I love anything you get me, Joonie," he murmured. "You know that, right?"

Joon gave a short little nod, though he still looked embarrassed. It was clear he did not know that.

Jin roamed the store in silence, only giving a little hum if he stumbled upon something particularly striking. Jessi and Joon talked as he did so, though sometimes they would slip into English to say particular phrases or words. Jin tried to ignore the way that unsettled him.

Some of Jessi's jewelry was too extravagant for his tastes, though there was a large range in color and jewels. Jin found a nice pair of earrings he liked, but realized that his ears weren't even pierced, which would make the gift useless. He didn't like the thought of bringing it up either, in case Jessi might offer to stick a few needles in his ears.

Eventually his eye caught on a necklace. It was purple stone, swirling and glittering like the night sky. It was fit on a black cord and lined with silver metal. Jin fell in love instantly. "This one," he declared a little breathlessly.

Joon and Jessi made their way over. Joon nodded as he appraised the necklace. "It suits you."

Jessi pulled it out from the case, holding it in her hands and turning it over. "There's space for an engraving on the back, though it will take a few days for me to finish. I can have it sent to the palace once I'm done, if that's something you're interested in."

"Yes," Jin said before he really realized what he was doing.

"What would you like it to say?"

He thought for a moment. "Our names," he settled on saying. It seemed the most neutral and simple, and it was something he really did want. It would be the only time he saw their names written together like that, like a real couple. Joon grabbed his hand, threading their fingers together, and beamed at him. He was adorable.

Jessi waved her hand and the necklace was gone. "Noted," she said airily. "I assume I can just charge it to your account, Joon?"

"Please do," Joon insisted. He glanced at Jin. "Well, we'll be on our way now. That's all we needed."

"Jin, would you give me and Joon a moment alone before you leave. I need to talk with him about something," Jessi said.

Jin sniffed. "I don't know why you can't just say it with me in here. Is it that secretive?"

Jessi's eyes flashed, and her smile grew sharper.

"Give us a moment, little bird. Yeah?"

Little bird. Jin backed down at her words, thinking of her seemingly all-seeing eyes and cryptic powers. He didn't know how much she knew, and he certainly didn't want her revealing any of his secrets if he stayed.

"I'll be waiting outside then," he declared, miffed. "Right by the door! If you don't come out in ten minutes, I'll assume the worst!"

"What, that I'm dead?" Joon snorted.

Jin didn't find it very funny, and so he slammed the door shut behind him, fuming in his jealousy.

It was the first time he'd felt insecure with Joon, the first time he'd compared himself to another and come out the loser. So Jin did what any paranoid lover would do.

He listened in on their conversation.

"Careful with that one, Joonie. He's dangerous," Jessi commented. "But you already know that, don't you?"

A pause.

"If he weren't dangerous, then I don't think I'd be nearly as interested."

Jessi laughed. "You always were drawn to darkness, weren't you?"

"Jessi, have you forgotten? I am darkness. At least that's what Eunha always says."

Another laugh. "I suppose you are, in a sense. It's not often that people come back from the dead. And if they do, they're a little unhinged."

Jin stopped breathing for a moment. Joon - his Joon - dead? When did this happen?

There was a pause again.

"You really can't tell me anything?" Joon asked.

"You know I can't. I can read energy and pick up on magical signatures, but the future? My prophecies are more emotional. There's no coherent manifestation, no linear thought. I couldn't conjure a picture of what your life might look together if I tried. That sort of magic comes at the kind of price no one wants to give, and it's not easy either."

Joon sighed. "I know, it just...I want to know that we'll be happy. That he'll take it well."

Jessi hummed. "Well, he won't be pleased. I can tell you that much. I know I would probably hex you into next week if I found out something as life-altering as that."

Jin's chest burned. He couldn't pinpoint this feeling, this sort of ache that grew and grew. He had so many more questions after day. Just who was this Jessi, and how did she know Joon? When in the world had Joon died, then been resurrected like some sort of Western messiah? What were they talking about, this news that someone - most likely Jin himself - wouldn't be pleased at?

Jin was furious and curious all at once.

Perhaps he did not know Joon as well as he thought he did.

The door swung open, and Jin jumped back, turning away and pretending like he'd been minding his own business. "Oh? Done already?" he asked, voice high-pitched.

Joon blinked. "You did say ten minutes," the alpha said slowly.

Jin waved his hand. "Right, right! Yes! I remember now!"

Joon held out his gloved hand, tilting his head to the side. "Well, shall we go now?"

Jin took it without even thinking, fingers curling around the familiar leather.

They made their way back to the palace slowly, taking their time together. Jin leaned against Joon,

grip growing tighter as he thought about all the questions and worries he had now that he had visited Jessi's shop.

"What's wrong?" Joon murmured, wincing a little at the grip on his hand.

Jin stopped, looking away in embarrassment for the silly questions he was going to ask. "Who is this Jessi woman? And how do you know her?"

"A psychic I met while studying abroad. She sells great jewelry and amulets, even does a couple spells to soothe aches and pains. She's great."

Jin's nose twitched. "I see," he said tightly. "Great, huh."

Joon looked at Jin, really looked at him, and seemed to finally see what it was that was bothering him.

The alpha pulled him away from what little crowd there was to duck inside one of the alley and in for a kiss. "You know you're the only one I want, don't you? For me, there's no other," he murmured, a centimeter away from Jin's lips.

Something twisted in Jin's stomach. Maybe it was guilt.

"I know I shouldn't worry, I just...think the worst sometimes," Jin said.

"You shouldn't. Not when it comes to us," Joon assured him, cupping Jin's face in his hands. "What we have is untouchable."

He wrapped his arms around Jin's midsection, and the omega couldn't help but think that this was the moment he'd been waiting for. His arms were free and he brought them behind Joon, hand ducking inside his sleeve to wrap around the knife. He felt the handle, started to pull it out slowly, then stopped.

Could he really kill Joon?

"You smell different today," Joon admitted, and Jin's blood ran cold.

Joon shouldn't have that great of a nose. He shouldn't be able to smell the knife on Jin, nor the killing intent and subsequent hesitation. How was it that he caught on? Jin was done for. Joon would rip him apart, perhaps leave him for dead because omegas did not kill their alphas. It would have to be now or never then, surely, before Joon pieced it all together.

"You smell like...iron," Joon's nose hovered over his pulse, which was surely beating fantastically fast.

Iron. it's too late. Jin thought of the knife. *He already knows. I'm finished.*

How had he miscalculated? He'd thought it would be easy, that he could slit Joon's neck just like he did Lord Woo's nephew.

For the Jin of the past maybe. Prince Seokjin. Seokjin had not spent months being courted by Joon, had not been held by an alpha as sweet and kind as Joon, who gave starving, poor children coins and smiles in the street when he could just kick them aside like most others would. Joon who saw the mess he'd made of an awful alpha and seemed damned proud of it. Joon who looked at him like he was something beautiful and precious, more than a broodmare or a disappoint or even a pawn.

Joon was nowhere near the sort of monster that Lord Woo's nephew was.

When had Jin grown so soft? He couldn't easily kill this man that he lo- cared for.

Jin was too busying panicking that he missed out on Joon's spiral into worry as well. He only focused once the alpha shook his shoulders slightly.

"-me, please! Are you hurt?" the captain was saying.

"Why would I be hurt?" Jin found himself asking.

"You smell like you're bleeding!"

Bleeding.

Jin's eyes widened. It couldn't be. He trembled a little, focusing his attention on his lower half. He was a little wet, but that was normal when he was around Joon.

Unless it wasn't arousal.

He couldn't tell. He was too inexperienced with this sort of thing, and if it was only the start then he'd have to see for himself to know. He'd have to check somewhere soon. Jin tugged at his coat and couldn't help the laughter that built in his chest at the possibility. "It's nothing, Joon! Don't worry! Come on, let's go back now!"

This time it was Jin who led Joon forward, a spring in his step even as he felt his stomach cramp once more.

Jin couldn't stop smiling. He realized that this was probably a little worrisome and very ridiculous, especially since most omegas and female betas were not the most pleased when something this unpleasant came their way. It was a welcomed chore, but a chore nonetheless.

He felt so very light now, like the world had somehow righted itself. Even as he scrubbed the muddied red from his undergarments, he kept beaming. Jin even started humming a little tune as he did so. One of the water maidens gave him a worried look as he continued his work, perhaps wondering if he'd lost his mind.

Jin ignored her. He wasn't useless anymore. This blood was a symbol of his fertility, of the possibility that he might one day have a child, that he might go through a heat like every ordinary omega did. He hadn't ruined his body, at least not yet. It was a cause for celebration.

Nothing could dampen his good mood!

Jin should have known better than to challenge the universe.

As Jin came back to the omegas' quarters, he was welcomed back by a loud wailing sound. He regretted opening the door as soon as the caterwauling reached his ears. Jimin was crying about something, but Jin found it hard to care due to how the other omega had treated him recently.

It seemed like ignoring him would be impossible, however, because as soon as Jin opened the door, bundle of clothes in hand, Jimin pointed a shaking, accusatory finger in his direction.

"You!" he hissed. "Please tell me you didn't know about this! That you didn't set me up!"

Jin wanted very badly to roll his eyes at the dramatics, but his good mood told him he should be on

his best behavior. "Jimin," he said softly, "what are you talking about?"

Tears welled in Jimin's eyes and he buried his face in his hands, cut off by the sobs that shook his frame. Leah muttered comforting words into his ear, rubbing his back. She looked up at Jin, shrugging her shoulders and looking just as helpless.

"What happened?" Jin asked, coming over to set his clothes on his own cot.

"He came back from Lady Jeon's a mess!" Leah whispered. "He said something about a Taehyung, that he needed to throw some necklace away!"

His good mood vanished, along with his annoyance. Suddenly he was worried and anxious. What happened to Taehyung, his beloved little brother, that would make Jimin this upset?

"Jimin," Jin said urgently. "You have to tell me what's wrong! What happened to Taehyung?"

Jimin's sobs died into sniffles, and he looked up at Jin. "You mean you really don't know?"

He sounded so very sad.

"No, I swear it! Please, Jimin, you have to tell me! I need to know!" Jin pleaded genuinely. He was desperate. If Jimin wanted him to kiss the bottoms of his feet, Jin would do it, provided he find out what happened to his brother.

But it seemed he wouldn't have to. A moment later, Jimin nodded. It took him several more to gather himself, sniffing. Finally, he started his story. "Lady Jeon got a letter from Lord Jeon. He went off on his business trip, you see..."

It was a somber mood that Namjoon came home to. Lord Woo and Hoseok were waiting for him in his study, both of them grim-faced and sullen. Hoseok's face was pale, and he looked so stricken that Namjoon realized it was the first time in a very long time that he'd seen his friend frown. Something was terribly wrong.

"What is it? What's wrong, Hoseok?"

They remained silent. Namjoon's first thought of Yoongi, who was surrounded by enemies on his own father's lands, but Hoseok would be a mess if that were the case. Instead he was just standing there in shock, hands trembling as he held a letter out to Namjoon.

"Perhaps it's better if you read it yourself," Hoseok said, voice sounding so far away and not like himself.

Terror gripped Namjoon, and he wondered what sort of loss this letter would contain. Had the Crown Prince been found in less than stellar condition? But something like that, though it made Namjoon feel a little guilty, wouldn't send both Lord Woo and Hoseok into this sort of state.

All Namjoon could do was stare at the letter. "Is this really necessary, Lord Woo?" he asked his elderly foster father.

Lord Woo simply looked at him. "Read the letter, Namjoon," he said.

Namjoon had not thought it would be about Jeongguk. He read the first line which was scrawled in Lord Jeon's handwriting, but it didn't make much sense to him. So he read it again. He read every

line twice, then thrice, so that he might make sense of it.

But he couldn't.

He thought of little Jeongguk, his doe eyes and shy smile. He was a child - eighteen, yes! But always a child in Namjoon's eyes. The omega could handle himself on a battlefield well enough, having been taught by both Namjoon and Hoseok. He'd been tutored by Yoongi as well, before the older omega had had to leave them for the palace walls.

But this was something else. This was his heart. His innocence.

Namjoon had sworn he would protect Jeongguk from this exact thing.

"Tell me you're joking," he pleaded.

But Hoseok and Lord Woo just stared at him and kept their silence. Finally, Hoseok said in a strangled voice. "Gods, I wish we were!"

Namjoon crumpled the letter in his fist, eyes burning and neck aching. He pressed his fists to his eyes to stop the flow of tears. "That son of a bitch," he hissed. "I'll fucking kill him! How could he do that? To his own son!"

Lord Jeon had made clear that he planned to marry Jeongguk off eventually, but Namjoon had hoped he could maneuver it so that Jeongguk had an actual say in the matter. He didn't want the younger boy to be trapped in a loveless marriage like Namjoon himself would inevitably be.

But now it was too late for that.

Namjoon's worst fear had come true, and Jeongguk had been forcibly married and mated. The letter that Lord Jeon wrote declared his son's nuptials loud and proud to the Bangtan court, a clear power grab if only because of the man who'd forced himself upon Jeongguk.

Taehyung, the bastard prince.

"Perhaps we should speed along the coronation, Namjoon," Lord Woo suggested. "We'll need to make a move of our own if Jeon intends to pursue this."

How despicable, Namjoon thought. That he would use his own son as a challenge.

He didn't know who he hated more. Lord Jeon, the man who had sold Jeongguk. Or Prince Taehyung, the man who had bought him.

Hmph. Namjoon would just have to kill them both.

Chapter End Notes

ya'll know what this means....POMEGRANATES AND WINE CAN BE UPDATED
YEEHAW!!!

pls leave comments and kudos if you enjoyed...they really keep me writing!!
AS ALWAYS, please follow me on [twitter](#)

Wine

Chapter Summary

AGAIN, NOT A NEW UPDATE!!!! BUT THE NEXT ONE SHOULD BE!!!

Chapter Notes

Warnings: smut, dubcon/noncon (there are moments when taehyung was aware what's going on, and moments when he's not, he consents to have sex with jeongguk, but not the commitment that comes with it)

i think that was it!!! if not, please tell me what i have missed and i will add it! i'm only human and i can make mistakes.

anyways enjoy!!!!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Things were awkward and tense as they both pretended the other didn't exist for the next few days. Jeongguk was tempted to just leave, but then he would have been on his own in territory that was relatively unfamiliar, a foolish choice, especially when there were still pockets of imperialists hidden in the countryside, just waiting to pounce on an infamous Bangtan rebel such as himself.

Jeongguk wouldn't let his anger cloud his judgement, though it simmered underneath the surface, just waiting to be let out. They rode in silence for the next few days, only speaking when absolutely necessary, and if they stopped at an inn for the night, they made sure to get two rooms, or at least one with two beds.

He kept the hairpin that Dowon had bought him in the bottom of his satchel, resting heavy against his outer thigh as it bumped against him every now and then, an annoying reminder of its presence.

Eventually Jeongguk started to recognize some of the landmarks they saw. There was a large mountain in the distance, covered in splotches of grey and white, and Jeongguk remembered that just passed that, there should be one of his father's bases. He thought about telling Dowon that he knew where they were now, but that would include explaining just how he knew and going into the details of his identity, which he had wisely kept from Dowon.

He'll just have to find out firsthand then, Jeongguk thought with relish, some of his anger soothing at the petty thought.

He wondered how shocked Dowon would be once he saw the Jeon flags, how much regret he would feel once he realized he lost the opportunity to deflower Lord Jeon's prized jewel. Jeongguk couldn't wait to see the look on his face.

So he led them on, passed the mountain. "This way," he said, moving in the direction of his father's base.

Jeongguk didn't give an explanation, which Dowon didn't seem to need, as the alpha followed

without complaint. But he seemed to no longer favor the quiet, for Dowon soon cleared his throat. Jeongguk immediately realized this was not a good sign.

“About the other night,” the alpha started.

Jeongguk rolled his eyes, the back of his neck heating in shame. “I’d rather not talk about that,” he said, voice tight.

Dowon continued anyways, looking very morose. “I’d just like to apologize. I’m getting over a broken engagement right now, and I wasn’t thinking clearly.”

“How funny,” Jeongguk commented, miffed. “So am I.”

Dowon appeared surprised, perhaps shocked that someone else would actually want Jeongguk. “Really?”

Jeongguk’s cheeks turned red without his permission. He didn’t know why he admitted that.

“Well, it’s not exactly an engagement or even a courtship, but there was this omega I really liked.”

At this, Dowon didn’t seem shocked, the fact that Jeongguk was attracted to other omegas. Instead he moved his horse closer, leaning in. “What happened?”

Jeongguk debated whether he should tell this alpha who broke his heart or not. What could it really hurt, though? He had already embarrassed himself enough, and Dowon was still so easy to talk to, when they did talk at all.

“It turns out he had a lover,” Jeongguk explained and ignored Dowon’s low whistle to continue. “A lover I had killed on the battlefield.”

Dowon’s jaw dropped “No way,” he whispers. “And you didn’t know that? Or you did and that’s why you killed him?”

Jeongguk shifted on his saddle, uncomfortable. “I didn’t know. I still don’t even know who was. He wouldn’t tell me and I’ve...well, killed a lot of people.”

He expected horror or disgust, maybe a mixture of both, but Dowon just looked over him appraisingly. Jeongguk wondered why the alpha was not shocked at the idea of a gentle, obedient omega acting so violently. Perhaps he knew others that were even worse than Jeongguk himself.

Perhaps it’s a sort of kink of his, Jeongguk thinks bitterly. He’s a strange man with strange tastes, and yet even he doesn’t want me.

Why did Dowon still look at him like that, even when he had made it clear he didn’t want Jeongguk? It was confusing and frustrating. Jeongguk was still so eager to give the other man whatever he might ask for, even if it were something as personal as information on an almost love interest. Jeongguk looked away, ashamed at how easy he was.

“I suppose you are strong as they-” Dowon stopped. Something passed over his face, which paled considerably, eyes going wide.

“What is that?” the alpha asked, deep voice high-pitched.

He was looking at a flag. Jeongguk didn’t understand how that was terrifying. It was just the symbol of the Bangtan Four, two rectangles. The only reason Dowon would be frightened was if -

Oh. He was not a rebel sympathizer.

“Jeongguk,” Dowon said, blinking. “Where are we going?”

Jeongguk opened his mouth, ready to guiltily admit that his father’s camp was so very close, that soon the Jeon flags would appear in the distance, but-

“JEON JEONGGUK!” someone hollered, sounding very overjoyed. There was the thunder of hooves all-around them suddenly, a seemingly whole militia appearing out of nowhere from the line of trees to circle around their two lone figures. One of his father’s patrols.

Dowon shifted closer, but he shot Jeongguk a heartbroken look, as if he had just been betrayed, as if Jeongguk being the son of Lord Jeon was something so very terrible. Jeongguk didn’t understand. Dowon was just a simple farmer, yes? The Bangtan forces wouldn’t hurt him, even if he didn’t support their cause. He had nothing to fear.

Unless...he was not just a simple farmer. Why would a simple farmer be injured like Dowon was? Hadn’t that thought crossed his mind? Jeongguk had waved it away, however, infatuated with the first handsome alpha that paid him attention.

His father’s men formed their circle, and one man rode out to greet Jeongguk, a grin stretching across his face. It was his older brother and the heir to the Jeon family, Sejin.

“Jeongguk! You’re alive,” the alpha greeted him, seemingly in awe.

Jeongguk shifted in his saddle, unnerved. “Why do you sound so shocked?”

Sejin shook his head, eyes wet. It was the closest he might ever come to tears. “We heard what happened to your escort. Killed by bandits, right?”

Jeongguk was silent. He thought of his father’s guard, who conspired to rape and kill him. When he and Dowon had left, they’d been alive. But -

He looked to Dowon, who wouldn’t meet his eyes, stubbornly looking straight ahead. The early morning that the two of them left - the alpha had went back to the camp, then returned smelling like copper. Like blood. The omega thought of the careful way Dowon might have slit their throats in their sleep, a noiseless, painless slaughter. Jeongguk disguised his sharp gasp by clearing his throat. He didn’t want to believe it, and yet he could.

Jeongguk nodded, allowing his brother to continue.

“We’d thought the worst, especially when there was no word back home that you were okay. Father started making memorial plans, and he’d almost broken the news to Mother. He was going to next week if we still hadn’t heard anything. But you’re here now! You’re ok! Oh, gods!”

The alpha took a deep breath, most likely collecting himself. Then Sejin dismounted his horse and spread his arms out. “Give your big brother a hug, won’t you?”

Jeongguk cracked a smile. Sejin might have been overbearing at times, but he had missed him the last several months they’d been parted. The last time he’d seen his brother had been before Jeongguk left with the army to march on Gangwon.

The omega dismounted his own horse and embraced his brother, who hugged onto him tightly, as if he didn’t want to let go. Sejin was not the worst big brother he could have. He was not as kind as their mother, but much kinder than father. Whenever Jeongguk was punished, it was always Sejin

who would chime in to try and soothe their father's bruised ego.

Once they parted, Sejin glanced over, behind Jeongguk, eyes squinting up at Dowon. "And who is this?"

"Dowon," Jeongguk explained, before Dowon could get a word in edgewise and say anything incriminating. He placed a hand on his brother's shoulder. "We found him injured and healed him. He helped me escape the bandits. He's a friend."

Dowon gave a sort of nod, appearing disgruntled the presence of this foreign alpha. "Pleased to meet you, Jeon Sejin," he said, sounding anything but pleased. "Well, Jeongguk. It looks like you're in good hands now. I'll take my leave."

He made to leave, but the circle of men did not part.

"Nonsense!" Sejin said. "I'm sure my father will want to meet you, reward you even! You saved his son's life!"

He gestured behind him. "Come back to camp with us! You'll be given a hero's welcome!"

Dowon looked pained, anxious even. He clearly didn't want to meet Jeongguk's father.

Whatever it was that had the alpha worried, it couldn't have been that bad. Dowon was probably just being dramatic.

"Just one night," Jeongguk pleaded, trying to convince him to stay. A selfish part of him wants to know just what it was that had Dowon so spooked, while another was hesitant for the alpha to disappear from his life completely. "And then you can leave."

Dowon looked at Jeongguk, met his eyes, taking in the view of him, and made the biggest mistake of all, though neither of them knew it quite yet.

He trusted Jeongguk..

"Alright," Dowon said, following them back to camp.

Jeongguk and Dowon were separated as soon as they entered the camp. Jeongguk was taken to a private tent, where several maids were summoned to fawn over him and clean his rugged appearance.

"Oh, my son! What good news this was! We'd thought the worst! We'll have to get the doctor! You must be looked at," were the first words his father said to him, as the old beta flung the flaps of the tent open to make his grand entrance.

The maids pressed wet rags to Jeongguk's cheeks and chest, stripping him of his shirt and slip, though the trousers stayed for now.

Jeongguk knew they would be removed once a doctor made an appearance.

"I'm fine," Jeongguk said sharply. "And I'm untouched. There's no need for some doctor to poke a finger between my legs, thank you very much."

His father raised an eyebrow. "How can we know for sure? You haven't been wearing the collar you've been given. I'll be shocked if some alpha hasn't taken advantage."

"Well, they certainly tried," Jeongguk shot his father a dark look. "Did you know what my escorts

had planned for me? Perhaps you wanted to teach me a lesson.”

His father only smiled, giving nothing away in his tone or gaze. “Why, Jeongguk, whatever could you mean?”

The omega looked away from his beta father, clenched his hands into fists. He wouldn’t get any clear-cut answers from this man. He never did. Jeongguk sighed and leaned his head back, allowing one of the maids to carefully scrub under his chin.

“I sent word to Namjoon that I was coming back about a month ago,” Jeongguk reasoned. “I don’t know why any of you were worried.”

His father laughed. “Yes, saying that you’d be back in three days. Don’t you remember? I have to wonder what took you so long. See why I’m suspicious of your virtue?”

Jeongguk frowned. “I failed in the mission they gave me. I was embarrassed. That’s why I took so long,” he lied.

He couldn’t exactly tell the truth, that he was besotted with the strange alpha he’d saved, made a sort of vacation out of it all. The real embarrassment lied in that truth.

“Why...failed? What made you think that?” his father sounded amused.

Jeongguk glanced at his father, furrowed his brow. “I was supposed to find Prince Taehyung,” he admitted. “But I didn’t!”

Something twisted in Jeongguk’s heart when his father’s smirk grew, more victorious and vicious than ever. His voice was filled with so much glee that it overflowed. “Oh, my darling son! But you did!”

Jeongguk stilled. “What,” he said. He couldn’t breathe, couldn’t even think. The information his father had just dropped scrambled his thoughts. He couldn’t pick apart left from right in his current state.

“You even brought him right to us,” Lord Jeon rubbed his hands together, like some sort of villain in a play. “I can’t say I’ve ever been more proud of you!”

That didn’t make sense. Jeongguk brought Dowon. The alpha was the only one who came with him. He never even caught a hint of Prince Taehyung’s scent on his journey. He didn’t understand what his father was talking about.

“I brought Dowon,” Jeongguk said slowly. “Not Taehyung. What are you talking about?”

His father tilted his head to the side, raising an eyebrow. “Oh, Jeongguk. You foolish, foolish boy. Don’t tell me you didn’t even know?”

Jeongguk’s throat felt tight, closed up and dry, and he couldn’t even breathe. He just shook his head and listened, almost as if in a daze, to his father’s story.

Just before Jeongguk had been sent on his mission by Yoongi, a different attempt to find Prince Taehyung and by extension, his brother Seokjin, had been implemented by Lord Jeon. His father had sent out some of his own men to find the bastard prince. He’d heard he would be heading north, back to his home village. They’d succeeded in engaging the prince and killed his guard, but had only managed in wounding Taehyung. He’d gotten away and they’d thought it a lost cause, that the prince had escaped off to Qing as they said or lay dead in a ditch.

But then Jeongguk had showed up with Prince Taehyung, whose trust he'd gained after tending to his wound – the very same wound that Lord Jeon's men had inflicted on the bastard prince.

"Dowon was Prince Taehyung. One of the men who went to capture him was there when Sejin welcomed you home and recognized him. He told me straight away - but Jeongguk, I thought you knew?"

"He told me he was a farmer," Jeongguk said faintly. There was a ringing in his ears. He still didn't quite believe it. He had thought things were off, yes, because what sort of farmer was injured like that? What sort of farmer had fine skin, hands uncalloused and smooth? He had the look of an aristocrat and held himself like one, too. What sort of farmer would be so scared at the sight of Bangtan rebel flags, even if he didn't support their cause? But Jeongguk had ignored all the warnings, had pushed them aside as quickly as they came to mind.

He acted like a foolish, simpering omega. Jeongguk had lost his senses over the first alpha that paid him any attention, and he'd never felt more stupid and embarrassed than he did now.

To know that he had tried to seduce the bastard prince Kim Taehyung (and failed so horrendously) had him covering his face in his hands, at a loss for words as the dry sobs shuddered through his body.

His father just looked at him, a little disgusted. "Stop crying," he commanded. "You know how it unnerves me."

The beta shook his head and got up from his seat to leave. "I'll have that doctor look you over whether you want it or not. With the way you're acting, I'm even more suspicious."

Jeongguk glanced up, eyes red. "What's going to happen to Do - Taehyung?" he corrected. "I'm just...curious I suppose."

It seemed as if his father saw right through him, though, because he ignored his son entirely and left. One of the maids hesitantly looked at the flap of the tent, then back to Jeongguk.

"Are you alright, young master?" she asked.

Something settled in Jeongguk's bones amidst all the turmoil. "No," he said, "but I will be."

His father came back with the doctor, who conducted his examination and found no evidence that Jeongguk's virtue had been compromised. His father had an odd mix of both relief and disappointment on his face.

"Hmph," he grunted. "Seems you weren't lying to me. Oh, well. I expect you to start wearing your collar again. We can't have the men at camp getting any sort of ideas about you."

"Of course," Jeongguk remarked, voice filled with venom. "I can't marry some common foot soldier, can I? You have bigger plans for me. Perhaps I'll be married to old Lord Woo. His pockets are rather deep. They'll make up for his lack of vigor."

His father's lips twisted into a frown. "It seemed your near death experience didn't soften that tongue of yours now did it?"

He handed the physician a bag of coins and told him to be on his way, waving his hands.

"You should be proud, Father," Jeongguk met his father's eyes. "I take after you in that regard."

The frown on the beta's face deepened. "I see none of me in you, Jeongguk. It's insulting that you think a mere omega could take after a beta such as myself."

"Just a beta. You make it sound like you're leaps above me in status, but you're not. You're boring. Can't even smell a thing. Some would think you were less off than me!"

Jeongguk expected the slap, but did not receive one. His father jerked his arm, face red, but restrained himself. The beta took a long, deep breath and finally said, "You're lucky I need that face of yours to look pretty here in a week. My bruises won't fade quick enough for the Duke of Qing."

Jeongguk lay down on the cot he'd been given, rolling his eyes. He pulled the blanket over his head and turned away from his father. He waited for the man to leave again for the final time. Though the omega remained as still as could be, his heart raced, feeling on edge.

I need to find Prince Taehyung, he resolves. Before my father kills him.

Because there was still an ugly, stupid part of him that yearned to see the alpha's face, even knowing that he lied, even knowing that he did not want him.

It was easier than he had thought it might be. For some reason, Jeongguk had expected the prince's whereabouts to be kept secret, only a select few authorized to speak with him. But he had no problem asking a passing servant for the bastard prince's location, and the guards who kept watch over Taehyung's tent let him in without so much as a second glance.

The tent was mostly bare, very little within offering any sort of comfort to its occupant, and in the middle of it was a pole. Chained to it, hands behind his back, was the bastard prince. Kim Taehyung. There were bruises mottled across his face, a black eye and bloody lip. He looked up at Jeongguk as he entered the tent and smiled, a bruised, bloodied thing.

"Do - Taehyung," Jeongguk corrected himself, the name still foreign in his mouth. "Are you really Prince Taehyung?"

Taehyung looked away. "That's what your father says," he reasoned, voice dull.

Jeongguk moved closer, close enough to cradle Taehyung's bloodied, dirty face in his hands as he knelt beside his prone figure. "What have they done to you?"

"Did you think I'd let them chain me to this post without a fight?" Taehyung scoffed. "No, I gave them a hell of one. It's just that there's only so much you can do when you're up against five men."

Jeongguk took a deep breath. "I'm sorry they did this to you," he murmured, removing his hands from Taehyung. "If I had only known..."

Taehyung licked his lips. "But you didn't, and that's my fault."

He paused for a moment more, and Jeongguk sat patiently, waiting for him to elaborate. Eventually, the alpha did

"Dowon was the name of my guard. When you found me, I'd just been attacked by Bangtan rebels - some of your father's men, in fact. Dowon...he died. It was the first name I thought of when you asked me for mine. I couldn't tell you who I was, couldn't trust you just yet."

Jeongguk nodded. His own father had said as much. "Did my father say anything to you? Ask you anything? He won't tell me what his plans are," Jeongguk murmured.

“I heard the men talking,” Taehyung said softly, eyes blank. “Apparently your father is bound and determined to get a Kim heir from me, specifically one with Jeon blood. Whether I have a say in that was out of the question.”

Jeongguk frowned, furrowing his brow. “So what? He plans to use you as a stud or something? Impossible! He can’t make you fuck someone!”

Taehyung smiled, a tight and harsh thing. “Oh, but he can, Jeongguk. Haven’t you ever heard of a rut? There’s ways of inducing those sorts of things. He’ll drug me up so much that the only thing I care about was getting my dick wet.”

Jeongguk flushed at that, at the awful picture he conjured in his mind that left him squeamish and bothered. He shook his head. “Who do they have in mind?” he asked, perhaps too high-pitched.

Taehyung shrugged his shoulders, as if it didn’t matter to him. “Some girl named Jieun.”

Jieun was a third or fourth cousin to Jeongguk, a young, vapid little thing who had had the personality snuffed out of her by her overbearing mother. She was plain-looking and obedient, the perfect fool for what Jeongguk’s father seemed to have planned.

A mating with a Kim prince, even if he was a bastard, would be a match more desirable than she could ever imagine.

But Jeongguk wouldn’t allow it.

A dark, stubborn emotion rooted itself in his chest. Taehyung deserved better than Jieun, than some dumb, near common girl. If Jeongguk couldn’t have Taehyung, then why should Jieun?

“I’m sorry,” Jeongguk breathed. He leaned forward, pressing his forehead against Taehyung’s own, hand curving around the back of the alpha’s neck. “This was all my fault.”

“You could not have known this would happen,” Taehyung reasoned. “I didn’t tell you who I was. If it’s anyone’s fault, it’s my own. I could have avoided all of this if I was just honest with you. I just...”

“Just what?” Jeongguk asked.

“I didn’t think I could trust you at first because I knew who you were,” Taehyung said finally. “It was clear you weren’t some merchant’s son, but the son of Lord Jeon. How could I trust the same man responsible for overthrowing my family? I thought you would kill me like all those rumors said, or maybe hand me over to the others. I didn’t think you might keep my secret.”

“I would have done anything for you, Taehyung,” Jeongguk couldn’t help but laugh as he pulled away. Hadn’t it been obvious? “I wanted you, but you didn’t want me.”

Taehyung winced, expression sharpening slightly. “Oh, I wanted you, lovely. More than you can even begin to imagine. But you didn’t know who I was. You were so pure, so trusting. How could I have fucked you without guilt, knowing you’d be calling out the wrong name? I didn’t want to hurt you in that way so-”

“So you just hurt me another way,” Jeongguk finished, the bitter sting of rejection still cutting his heart.

Taehyung met his eyes, gaze dark. “Trust me, Jeongguk,” he began. “If I had known things would end up like this, if I could go back and do things over? We’d still be in that bed in the inn.”

Jeongguk stood, at a loss for words. His chest felt full, but in a sort of lighthearted way. His cheeks were flushed, but he composed himself, allowing no more emotion to slip out. "I'll do what I can to help you, though I can't promise much," he swore.

The omega turned to leave.

"For what it's worth, Jeongguk," Taehyung called out to him, voice strained. "I'm sorry."

No, the omega thought, exiting the tent. *It is I who should be sorry.*

It was Jeongguk who pleaded with Taehyung to head back to his father's camp, to arrive at his own doom. Jeongguk almost instinctively knew that once his father had a child with Kim and Jeon blood, once he got what he wanted, the beta would no longer have use for Taehyung. Lord Jeon would most likely kill him as soon as the baby was delivered safe and sound, perhaps lock him away in case the child didn't last a year. Jeongguk thought of Taehyung's dark eyes, the light in them faded as Taehyung lived the rest of his life - if you could even call it a life - as Lord Jeon's prized stud. Kim blood was so very rare nowadays, and there were people who would pay good money for the possibility to have a child with a phoenix seared onto their skin.

There was no way to sneak Taehyung out. He was watched by at least one guard, if not two or three, every hour of the day, and even more were posted on the outskirts, the best trackers who scented the air for any unwanted outsiders or possible deserters. Jeongguk could not fight his way out of this one.

Jeongguk's hand came up to finger at the collar he now wore around his neck, the precaution that his father has forced upon him. It felt restrictive, as it were closing in on him with every second that passed, making it so he could not breathe. Once the omega made it back to his own tent, he found the key for the collar and clicked it open, sliding the metal off of his skin. Jeongguk looked at himself in the mirror, staring at his dark, wide eyes, his round face and long lashes. Jeongguk leaned his head to the side, arching his neck.

He wondered what it might look like on him.

A mating mark.

Jeongguk closed his eyes. He thought of Taehyung's teeth, pressing into his flesh, permanently searing his scent inside. What would it be like to mate him, to carry a son or two of Taehyung's inside of him? Jeongguk's breath caught, and he opened his eyes. The reflection stared back at him, a stupid little boy with stupid little dreams who never learned.

His sword has been confiscated by his father, replaced by a pretty necklace to wear when the Duke of Qing came calling in a week's time. Jeongguk had his small set of makeup and perfumes, the dresses and pretty hanboks the maids left behind. They were the only weapons he has left.

And so Jeongguk recognized it, knew that the only thing he could do - the only power he had - was to turn towards the very nature he'd been fighting against for help.

"It's high time you stop pretending to be an alpha!" his father had sneered at him once the war was won. *And start being an omega*, went unsaid.

You will get what you want so desperately, Father, Jeongguk thought, as he began to decorate his face with pretty paints the way Jimin taught him. *An omega son and a Kim heir with Jeon blood, all in one go.*

Sejin had never thought of Jeongguk as a threat, had never thought him capable of going against their father's wishes. To be fair, for the majority of Jeongguk's life, he'd thought the same. Lord Jeon's word was law, and the only way to keep the family together, to survive, was to follow it. If Lord Jeon told him to pick up a sword and fight, he would do it. If Lord Jeon told Jeongguk to discard the sword that had forged him in favor of soft, pretty skirts, he would do it.

That was what Sejin thought of him. Jeongguk wasn't insulted, if only because his brother's ignorance worked in his favor. He only had to ask Sejin about their father's plans, and his older brother spilled all that he knew. It would take a couple of days for the aphrodisiacs to arrive from town, but when they did, the cooks were instructed to prepare a meal for Kim Taehyung. Young Mistress Jieun would go inside to feed it to him.

The rest was self-explanatory.

"What if she doesn't please him, though?" Jeongguk cocked his head to the side, pretending that he was not currently seething in anger at the thought of Jieun touching Taehyung. "What if he doesn't like the look or smell of her?"

His brother smirked and replied rather vulgarly, "Then she'll climb on top of him anyways. Anger and distress are supposed to make the seed take better, you know."

Jeongguk grimaced, and his brother mistook his disgust for nothing more than an omega's disposition in regards to sex. Sejin clapped him on the back and laughed. "Why are you so worried anyways?"

Jeongguk looked away. "I don't know," he answered. "Perhaps I'm curious."

"Oh, baby brother. Don't worry!" the alpha leaned in closer to whisper. "I've heard Father is entertaining the Duke of Qing in about a week, and I have it on good authority that you won't be alphaless for long!"

He said it like it was some joyful event. Jeongguk forced himself to smile, which wasn't too hard, knowing what he did.

"Yes, I suppose I won't be," he agreed, knowing it to be true.

Jeongguk waited patiently the next few days, biding his time, and when the crate from town arrived, his heart almost leaped out of his chest. Tonight then. The time had finally come.

He lined his eyes with kohl and smudged rouge on his lips, pinching his cheeks to turn them red. Jeongguk thought that Jimin would be proud of him, of the pretty way he's covered his face. Remembering Jimin made his heart ache in ways he still could not explain. Though there had been nothing expect Jeongguk's one-sided infatuation, he missed the omega even now.

Jeongguk caught up with Jieun as she exited her own tent, stopping the girl in her tracks.

Jeon Jieun was some third or fourth cousin Jeongguk barely knew, a girl with a plain face but pretty eyes. One of his aunts or cousins seemed to have thrown some makeup on her so she might appear more desirable, and the silk gown she wore was sheer, leaving little to the imagination. Jeongguk briefly noted how tall she was, how alike their forms might be in the dark. Jeongguk had the softness of an omega on his side, along with dark hair and dark eyes similar to Jieun.

His cousin peered out through her thick veil, cheeks puffing out indignantly. She did a double-take at first, perhaps surprised to see Jeongguk so...well-dressed, befitting of his status for once. She recovered soon enough, though, spitting venom once she did.

“What do you want?” she hissed, indignant that Jeongguk had interrupted her on her way to Taehyung’s tent.

Jeongguk’s mouth moved before he could even process the words. “Your clothes,” he blurted out. “Give me your clothes.”

His cousin let out a loud squawking sound, “What?”

“I’m taking your place. My lord father’s orders.” Jeongguk held out his hand and waited.

The girl narrowed her eyes and stared at him for a moment, then snorted. “Ha! As if! This was the best match I’ve ever been offered. Your father has told me I’ll give birth to a king. I won’t let you ruin this for me. He’s going to be mine,” she drew her lips back in a snarl, hands on her hips.

Something in Jeongguk growled, territorial and dismissive of her words, because how dare she think she was entitled to Taehyung. Taehyung, who murmured sweet words as they slept beside each other, who pinned a golden lily to Jeongguk’s hair, who eliminated the alphas that had planned to do him harm. How could Jieun lay claim to Taehyung, an alpha who never had been, nor would be hers?

“Fine,” Jeongguk said, voice tight. He rolled his shoulders in an effort to relax and gestured for his cousin to go about her business.

She moved on, sniffing as she held her head high. She made it four steps, just enough that her back was towards Jeongguk, and then Jeongguk reached his hand back, bringing it forward to slam against a nerve in her neck. She dropped like a rock.

Jeongguk caught her head before it could hit the ground, cradling it in his hands. He began to pull her body away from view of the camp, behind a large patch of bushes, and changed his clothes for her own. He made sure Jieun herself was wearing his clothes, as he was not needlessly cruel and would not leave her naked. The robe fit him well, and the veil was thick enough to hide the more masculine features.

Jeongguk’s heart raced as he approached the tent, ducking his head to the soldier standing guard. He stood there, trembling, and waited to be left inside. The guard gave a sniff, then nodded his head. “Jeon Jieun, right?” he asked, opening the tent flap and gesturing inside.

Jeongguk hesitated, fingers grasping his robe. It felt like a stone had lodged in his throat, a bundle of nerves eating at his spine. It was different now, knowing what he must do. Before when he had gone to Taehyung, it had been just that. Talking. He wanted to confront the bastard prince while making sure he was safe and sound, that his father hadn’t tortured the alpha. Now Jeongguk planned to do much more than talking.

“Are you okay?” the guard asked.

Jeongguk jolted, turning to look at the guard. He forced his voice to sound high-pitched. “Nervous,” he admitted.

The guard laughed. “There’s no need. He can’t hurt you, can’t even bite you. The bastard’s chained to a pole in there. You’ll be fine.”

Jeongguk inclined his head once more, murmuring his thanks, and forced himself to enter the tent, though his feet felt like lead.

As soon as he entered, he smelled the cloying scent of Taehyung, like sage or cloves, but it was

muskier this time, heavy with something else. It was his arousal, and yet it was a thousand times greater than what Jeongguk knew it to be.

Jeongguk felt himself grow wet in response to Taehyung's pheromones, an almost immediate reaction.

"Oh, Taehyung," he said, anxiety giving way to concern as he gazed at the alpha. "What have they done to you?"

The meal beside him was half-eaten already, goblet of wine knocked over and spilled. Jeongguk threw the veil aside and kneeled in front of Taehyung, whose eyes were darker than normal, almost red in their haze. The alpha was more beast than man, and he growled at Jeongguk, snapping at his fingers and yanking at the chains that bound him. Jeongguk glanced at the alpha's hands, finding that his wrists had been rubbed raw from trying to escape his chains.

The tears came easily then, dripping down Jeongguk's face slowly, silently.

They'd already fed Taehyung half of his meal. There was only a piece of fruit left, a crimson pomegranate sprinkled with white powder.

Jeongguk had wanted to ask, to offer Taehyung a choice. *Me or Jieun*, he would have said. But now even that was taken from them.

He reached over, fingers pressing into the flesh of the fruit, and brought it up to take a bite. It was both sweet and bitter, so full that the juice ran down Jeongguk's arms, spilling inside the folds of his gown as he offered it to Taehyung next.

He grabbed ahold of Taehyung's chin, tilted it towards him. The alpha narrowed his eyes, zeroing in on the fruit in his hands. Taehyung bit his lip, and it seemed like there was a hint - a glimmer, perhaps - of consciousness in his gaze.

"Eat," Jeongguk commanded. "Please."

Taehyung did as Jeongguk asked, biting into the fruit as if it was the only thing food he'd had in days, which it clearly was not, judging by the empty bowl of soup. Jeongguk took Taehyung's acceptance as permission, if only to ease his guilty conscious. The omega sniffled as he wiped the juice from Taehyung's mouth.

The alpha's tongue darted out, swirling around Jeongguk's fingers. He cocked his head to the side, dazed yet again.

Jeongguk closed his eyes, stomach tightening at the wet, warm sensation that coated his fingers. He thought of his cousin Jieun coming in here, of Taehyung accepting her as easily as he did Jeongguk. Even if he hadn't, then Jieun would have mated him against his will. It was not like Taehyung could do anything about it, chained to the post like he was.

The post. Jeongguk refused to follow through with Taehyung restrained. He didn't care if Taehyung clawed at him, if he tore him to shreds. Jeongguk would not climb on Taehyung like he was some sort of stallion.

Jeongguk was strong. Even though he hadn't been fighting or practicing as often as he used to, he still had plenty of muscle. He coaxed Taehyung, using his gentle voice and omega's croon to persuade him to help. Taehyung tugged up, Jeongguk tugged down, and together they snapped the chains in half. It took a moment for Taehyung to recover and Jeongguk leaned back, panting as well.

Then Taehyung looked at him, blinked, and scented the air.

He was on Jeongguk immediately, nose pressing against the omega's neck, nearly digging into it. Scenting him. Jeongguk flushed, taken aback at Taehyung's aggressive forwardness.

"Taehyung, calm down!" he pleaded, words falling on deaf ears.

The alpha finished scenting him, deciding to press sloppy kisses up and down his neck, and he moved, lower half pressing against Jeongguk's own crotch. Taehyung rutted against him, huffing and whining as his hard cock rubbed against Jeongguk's. Jeongguk himself quickly hardened in response, small cock poking up through his gown, and if he wasn't soaked before then he was now, clenching around nothing as the need to be filled grew.

His cheeks were red, and he hesitantly rocked along with Taehyung's frantic rutting. Jeongguk didn't really know how to take care of an alpha, let alone one in rut.

"Jeongguk," Taehyung murmured, voice slurred and aware.

Jeongguk inhaled and started to fiddle with the fastening of Taehyung's pants.

"Come on," he urged. "We have...have to be quick...I'm not supposed to be here!"

Jeongguk tried to let his instincts take over, to submit to his baser self. But the omega that usually tried to claw its way out of him was nowhere to be found. Jeongguk was on his own, with nothing more than a basic understanding of things, and a half-conscious Taehyung slobbering over him.

The omega felt frustration well up inside of him, but he knew he must follow through. It was the only way to save Taehyung. Once Taehyung's trousers were off, Jeongguk started to slip out of his silky, white gown. This seemed to rile Taehyung up, for the alpha became even more excited and actually helped this time, tearing the material off of Jeongguk and manhandling him, spreading his legs open. Jeongguk whimpered, but ended up reaching out to wrap his hand around Taehyung's cock, guiding it inside gently.

His efforts were in vain. It hurt all the same, even with all of the wet slick that Jeongguk had produced. Jeongguk leaned back, gasping as the pain split up his back, as if a knife was shoved inside of him. He softened a little, not liking the pain, and removed his hand from Taehyung, who seemed to take it as permission to thrust fully all the way inside. Jeongguk bit his hand to muffle his scream. It was the most painful thing he had ever felt, not pleasurable at all.

Taehyung gave him a moment, seeming to recognize that there was something wrong, and he pressed kisses to Jeongguk's teary face, tongue lapping at his tears. The alpha let out a little whine and eventually started a slow pace, dragging his cock out and pushing back in. Jeongguk endured, and slowly it started to feel a little better. He thought it would be much better if they had words, if Taehyung could speak to him and litter him with praises.

Taehyung's pace picked up, and he thrust harder and faster, hands pressing down on Jeongguk's wrists, squeezing and leaving bruises in their wake. Jeongguk could feel it building somehow, a release coming on.

"Tae," he murmured, arching his neck. "Here. Bite here."

Taehyung gave one last final thrust, and as he found his release, as his knot started to form, he sunk his teeth into Jeongguk's flesh, biting the scent glands there. Something clicked into place then, a thousand sensations at once. Jeongguk came with a wail, body trembling as he felt Taehyung's knot thicken inside of him.

Taehyung gave a huff and collapsed on top of him, heavy as he pressed down. Jeongguk tilted the alpha's chin up with a finger, leaning over for a kiss. It was weird, tasting his own blood on Taehyung's tongue. Taehyung pulled back, eyelids flickering, and rested his head on Jeongguk's chest. After a few moments, the alpha started to snore. Jeongguk giggled, but couldn't find it in himself to be annoyed. They would be stuck together for a few hours anyways, and there was no telling how long this induced rut might last. Jeongguk would be lucky if Taehyung just slept through the rest of it, his need to fuck and find a mate perhaps bated by their own mating.

This lifetime commitment was the only way. Jeongguk was not in heat, was nowhere near it, whereas Jieun was due for one any day now. An alpha's pheromones would have sent her into a full-blown heat, no doubt, and there was nothing more fertile than an omega in heat. The chances that Jeongguk might conceive from this coupling weren't the greatest, which meant his father would most likely have to wait on the heir he so desperately wanted, and he couldn't kill Taehyung until he had that.

It also meant that Taehyung and Jeongguk were tied together for the rest of their lives. There was a bond there, a weak, simmering bond that clicked into place as soon as Taehyung bit him. It was new and volatile, which meant that if Jeongguk's father wanted to kill Taehyung right away, he'd have to kill Jeongguk too. It was yet another insurance to protect Taehyung from Lord Jeon, to keep the monster at bay.

Jeongguk gave a gentle sigh, feeling satisfied in more ways than one. He pressed his nose to Taehyung's hair, taking in the wonderful scent of his alpha. Before he knew it, his eyes were fluttering closed as well, and he drifted off to sleep.

When his father stormed inside the tent, having found Jieun and discovered Jeongguk missing, it was too late. The deed was already done.

He found Jeongguk sitting naked, blood like fresh wine dripping from his torn neck and down to his chest. The omega was covered in bite-marks and bruises for all to see, but the most damning evidence remained hidden. Taehyung's head rested on his lap, hiding the mess where the alpha had stolen inside and spent himself - slick and come and blood all splattered alike along Jeongguk's inner thighs.

Taehyung murmured something in his sleep. It was the only noise within the tent, for Lord Jeon and the guards who had entered had stopped breathing.

Jeongguk lifted his head, tilting his chin up. He felt a trickle of blood reach his sternum, and a smile spread across his face, triumphant and smug.

He was his father's son, through and through.

His father left with a shake of his head, but something glinted in his eyes. Jeongguk took a shaky breath, knowing what that meant. He was planning something now. He had seen an opportunity, and he was going to pounce on it. Jeongguk ran his fingers through Taehyung's silky brown hair, murmuring a children's song, one that his mother used to sing to him.

Once Taehyung's head was cleared, they would face Lord Jeon together.

It only took another day for that to happen. Lord Jeon sent food and water to them courtesy of a maid who left it at the tent entrance. She also left some clothes for the pair of them. It was a good thing that Jeongguk's father had allowed them the food, because Taehyung buried himself between Jeongguk's legs, fucking him at least five more times before he came to. It got better for Jeongguk each time, the ache dulling as Jeongguk's body adjusted itself to Taehyung's cock.

Taehyung regained consciousness that next day, and he nuzzled at the nape of Jeongguk's neck that morning, humming. "Thank you for helping me through that," he murmurs, arms tightening around the omega, "even if you weren't supposed to."

"It was no problem," Jeongguk said, turning his head back to look at Taehyung. "I...liked it a lot."

Taehyung opened his eyes. Then he did something funny. His jaw dropped. His eyes were caught on the mark on Jeongguk's neck. He sat up and scooted away. "No," he whispered, terrified. "Tell me...I didn't - "

"You did," Jeongguk said solemnly. He rose and grabbed Taehyung's hand. "It was the only way."

"The only way? What the fuck? We mated! Don't you know what that means? We're stuck together...for life!"

Jeongguk winced and let go of Taehyung's hand. "Stuck?" he asked, hurt.

Taehyung smacked his forehead. He got up, spying the clothing by the entrance. He started to change quickly, all the while talking very fast. "Shit, I didn't mean it like that! I'm just saying...I'm not exactly ready for a commitment like this? I'm only nineteen, Jeongguk, and you - you're Jeon's son. You're one of the Bangtan Four even! Do you know what my brother's going to think when he finds out?"

"Well, I'm eighteen," Jeongguk crossed his arms over his chest, narrowing his eyes. "And I don't know why it matters. We were against the mad king, not you and Prince Seokjin."

Taehyung closed his eyes, tilted his head back as he finished buttoning his shirt. "My brother...will not forgive this."

"It's not that big of a deal," Jeongguk frowned. "We both care for each other, if even a little. That should be all that matters, right?"

Taehyung stared at him, as if he's nothing more than a foolish child, hands falling to his side. "You can't really think that. Can you?"

Jeongguk flushed, looking away. "Hand me my clothes," he commanded, deciding not to answer.

The clothes landed on Jeongguk's lap, and he stood to change into them. He felt Taehyung's gaze on him as he dressed, though he turned his back, and arousal thrummed through the bond, even amidst all the panic.

"You can whine and cry all you like," Jeongguk said finally. "But we're mated now. That's that. I let it happen, because I thought it would be best for you. If my father wants to kill you these next few months while a bond is forming, he'll have to kill his own son as well. He won't want to do that."

"Your father's men tried to rape you," Taehyung felt the need to remind Jeongguk. "Are you sure he doesn't want to cause you harm?"

Jeongguk finished tying his hanbok, a simple pink thing, and turned around. "My father has always been an odd man. He does what he thinks will be in his best interests. And right now - "

Jeongguk's hand rested on his belly. "He wants a child from us, preferably a son. He'll keep me alive that long, I think."

“He wants an heir to supersede Seokjin’s claim,” Taehyung growled, furious at the thought.

Jeongguk glanced at him, frowning. “Namjoon’s claim, you mean,” he said, trying to smooth the ends of his hair down. It was very hard when one didn’t have a mirror.

Taehyung had gone unusually pale at Jeongguk’s flippant words. “Namjoon’s claim?” he repeats. “Kim Namjoon? My cousin, the little boy they engaged to - “

He shut his mouth. “That Namjoon?”

Jeongguk stared, a little concerned. He had heard of no engagement regarding Namjoon. “Yes, I suppose so,” the omega revealed hesitantly.

Before they could discuss anymore, the tent to the flap was opened. It was not Lord Jeon, like Jeongguk might have expected or even hoped for. Just a guard, who asked them to come out and meet his father at his tent. The guard escorted them, so neither Jeongguk or Taehyung said a word to each other on the way there, wisely considering that anything they said could be reported back to Lord Jeon and used against them.

There were several men there with Lord Jeon’s father, all of them standing around in a circle, waiting for the two of them to arrive. Jeongguk was a little worried at the sight of them. They felt...off to him.

“Jeongguk, my son!” Lord Jeon greeted. He did not come over to hug the omega for show like he usually did. Instead he just steepled his hands together, leaning back in his chair. “I was hoping I could ask my new son-in-law some questions!”

The beta gave a nod to one of the men, who moved towards Jeongguk menacingly. Jeongguk flinched, senses on red alert, and Taehyung let out a growl from his side, baring his teeth as he grabbed Jeongguk’s hand to tug the omega closer.

“You can ask me with Jeongguk here. I won’t let you take him away.”

“Now, now! I don’t plan on taking him away. I just need to look him over, make sure you haven’t damaged the goods, as they say. He has always been a fragile thing!” Lord Jeon tutted

Jeongguk rolled his eyes. “You didn’t seem to think that when you let me out on a battlefield,” he remarked sullenly.

Lord Jeon ignored him, and the man who’d moved earlier splayed his hands out, neck bared in a gesture of submission. “He’s yours, I get it,” the man said to Taehyung.

For a tense moment, Taehyung stared at him, perhaps trying to read his intentions. Eventually, he let go of Jeongguk’s hand, fingertips stroking the scent glands on his wrist in a parting gesture.

“What do you want?” Taehyung asked, eyes never leaving Jeongguk as the omega was escorted over to his father.

“Just some pleasantries, my prince! Nothing more than that!” Lord Jeon promised, fidgeting with something silver at his side. As Jeongguk stood before him, he reached a hand out to grab the omega’s chin. He tilted it to the side so that he might get a good look at the bite mark.

Lord Jeon clicked his tongue. “Ah, it seems a bond will form. The bite’s taking. How...*wonderful!*”

“Tell me, Prince Taehyung. What will your brother think of this union?” the beta continued, voice

and tone still as cheery as could be.

Taehyung stilled, eyes going wide. Jeongguk felt panic ripple through their bond, anxiety gnawing its way towards him. The mention of Taehyung's brother had made him afraid.

"Will he be pleased?" Lord Jeon hummed, turning Jeongguk away from him, gesturing for the boy to get on his knees. Jeongguk obeyed, albeit begrudgingly. "I have to wonder, you see, if only because the last anyone knew, your darling mate here had killed you. Surely you can understand my hesitation."

"I don't know," Taehyung said. "My brother and I aren't as close as you seem to think."

It was clear it was a lie. Taehyung loved his brother more than anything in this world. Even Jeongguk, who had known him less than a month, knew it to be true. Jeongguk shut his eyes. He knew what his father wants now, what every Bangtan rebel had wanted since the Crown Prince disappeared from the palace.

To know where he was now.

"Father," Jeongguk growled, a warning. But the next thing he knew, there was something sharp beneath his chin, gliding against his throat. His father tugged at his hair, pulling his head back.

Taehyung let out another growl, this one more furious and deadly than the last, and surged forward, but the other men sprang into action so they could hold him back.

"Then it won't be much of a betrayal, will it? To give him up," Lord Jeon smiled. "Tell me where your brother was hiding, Taehyung, and I won't have to slit your mate's throat."

"No!" Jeongguk screamed, the sound strangled and pitiful as it left his throat, but the hands of the soldier pressed down, holding him in place by the shoulders.

You can't, Jeongguk thought. Don't make him give up Seokjin. If you make him give up his brother, he will never ever forgive me. There will be no turning back from this.

Taehyung was already unhappy that they had mated, but to find out that this mating would cost him his brother's life?

"Father," Jeongguk pleaded desperately, "Please don't!"

But his father ignored him yet again and the knife pressed into Jeongguk's skin, almost daring to break skin. Jeongguk met Taehyung's eyes. He saw the conflict there, the struggle as Taehyung warred with himself. The desire to protect his flesh and blood versus the newfound instinct to protect his mate. It was engraved in his very bones now to take care of his omega, to do whatever he could to keep him alive. Slowly, Jeongguk shook his head, silently pleading with his eyes that Taehyung might let him die.

Jeongguk would rather die than live with this crux, the knowledge that he'd made Taehyung give up the thing he loved most in the world. It would not be worth it.

But if Jeongguk died right here and now, so too would Taehyung – a consequence of their new, fragile bond.

There was no easy answer to this.

Taehyung trembled, opening his mouth and closing it silently. *He is crying*, Jeongguk realized.

Tears falling from his eyes, running down his cheeks. Jeongguk wanted nothing more than to kiss them away. At last, his alpha came to some sort of conclusion, taking a deep breath as his shoulders slouched.

In a broken voice, Taehyung told all that were gathered here just where his brother was hiding.

And Jeongguk wished he was dead.

Chapter End Notes

ok so like i promised this is the last not new update!! NEXT UPDATE WILL BE THE WEDDING, AND HOPEFULLY I CAN HAVE IT OUT BY FEBRUARY 4th!!!...

ok thank you guys <3333

as always please comment or leave kudos if you enjoyed

Happiness, Fleeting

Chapter Summary

WARNINGS: references to brief attempted noncon & incest (just the yoongi/uncle thing, nothing new). there's smut, too, quite a very long scene of it (i hope it's not too awkward omg!!! :> i tried my very best guys!!) also a reminder...jin is intersex in this fic...

as always, PLEASE tell me if i've left out an important trigger warning...now that that's over with, ENJOY MY FRIENDS <3

Chapter Notes



"ah, my love, you've ruined me"

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Namjoon,” Lord Woo said, as grave as ever. “You can’t continue messing around. It’s time to get serious.”

Namjoon clenched his jaw, and the anger that bristled beneath his skin gave way to the pinpricks of annoyance. “What do you mean? When have I been messing around?”

Lord Woo shared a look with Hoseok, who then looked away guiltily, refusing to meet Namjoon’s eyes.

“You’ve been cautious, I’ll give you that, but there are always eyes watching you in this palace, Namjoon. A few of the servants have told me about that omega you’re courting. A kitchen servant, is he not? You can’t go prancing off with this common omega and neglect your duties. Not anymore. It’s time for you to take the crown.”

Namjoon felt as if a weight had settled on his shoulders, along the stones that rested in his stomach. First the news of Jeongguk, and now this?

“You said we had to wait,” Namjoon reasoned, a little helplessly. “For Prince Seokjin to come back.”

“There’s no time now, not if Jeon truly has mated his son to that bastard. He could be drafting up a claim as we speak! You can marry Seokjin later. Now? Now we have to act!”

Namjoon looked to his friend. “Hoseok! What do you think of all this?”

The other alpha finally met his eyes. “Lord Woo is right. It’s known that Taehyung is a Kim, even if he is a bastard. The courts and common folk will accept him easily enough. But they don’t know about your lineage. If we don’t move the coronation up then we could have another war on our hands.”

“It’s time you do your duty,” Lord Woo said solemnly, with a nod of his head as he clasped his hands together.

Some of the anger began to seep out, so much frustration that it leaked. Hadn’t Namjoon been doing his duty? His voice trembled with rage as he said, “I took Gangwon and the capital, then you told me to lay low, to play the part of this Captain of the Guard. I’ve attended all the duties you’ve given me! How can I start what I’ve already begun?”

Lord Woo sighed. “Forgive me. I worded that wrong. What I mean is that you need to give up on this little tryst of yours.”

“Jin?” Namjoon asked. He shook his head. “I don’t plan on giving him up.”

Lord Woo’s jaw dropped. Even Hoseok looked a little shocked.

“What?” Lord Woo squawked. You can’t possibly mean - “

“He’s a bastard, too,” Namjoon explained hurriedly, “one of Paek’s. It wouldn’t be much of a stretch to legitimize him, and then take him as a concubine.”

“No,” Lord Woo shook his head, scowling. “I won’t allow it! The Council will never agree!”

“Why not? It solves the issue of an heir! Prince Seokjin is a beta. The two of us can’t possibly have a child together. You’ve been pressing me to select a concubine for months due to that fact, but I’ve already found one.”

Lord Woo’s face reddened. “Yes, I wanted you to select a concubine. Perhaps Young Mistress Min or my darling Hyewon! Not some commoner off the streets. I don’t care who his father might be, it

won't change the fact that he's not of suitable standing!"

An attack on Jin's character was something Lord Woo should not have started. Namjoon stepped forward, face flushed as he clenched his hands into fists. But Hoseok placed a hand on his shoulder to stop him.

"It would never work, Namjoon," Hoseok said quietly. "You love that servant too much to make him a concubine, to steal your child from him and make it Prince Seokjin's own. And what will Prince Seokjin think when you choose a bastard's bed every night over his?"

Namjoon's shoulders lowered, and he took a deep breath, imagining it. He thought of the faceless Crown Prince Seokjin already relegated to royal consort instead of king, but then to be taken treated as a second bride? It would be an embarrassment, an attack on his pride. If Seokjin was truly as cruel as so many rumors said, he would not allow himself to be walked over. There was no telling what he might do, what harm might come to Jin.

Jin, who still did not know who Namjoon was, who had not seen the heavy burden that graced Namjoon's neck.

"Exactly! Lord Min did insist you make Prince Seokjin your first bride, your consort. Can you imagine the embarrassment if he's made to answer to some bastard concubine?" Lord Woo continued.

"You knew what it meant when you accepted Eunha's deal," Hoseok reminded him.

Namjoon closed his eyes. He could almost feel her there, spindly, withered fingers pressing on his shoulders, flitting around his neck where the phoenix burned bright.

"Uneasy lies the head that wears the crown," the witch had whispered, voice hoarse. She'd traced a circle around his skull, as if putting an imaginary crown there already. "You've risen again under the moonlight to usher in the sun. The only way you can do that is to be born anew. Do you know what this means?"

To throw it all away, to surrender myself to the crown and her people. That's what it means to be a king. Namjoon's scarred hands shook, suddenly feeling rather sweaty underneath his gloves.

Could he give up Jin?

No.

He refused. He had something that was his. It was the first time he could remember being this possessive, wanting to own and be owned in return. He knew Jin was the same, he could read it in his eyes, taste it on his lips, feel it in the way the other omega raked his claws along his forearms and staked a claim. They hadn't even mated yet, but the two of them were intertwined so intricately that there was no distinguishing one from the other. They were no longer two, but one.

It would take more than that line of reasoning to convince Lord Woo. The elderly man had saved Namjoon, had raised him in the hopes that he might become king and bring glory to the Woo Clan. He loved Namjoon like a son, and his concern came from what he must believe were Namjoon's best interests.

He'd often joked with Namjoon, or at least it had seemed like a joke, that the younger would become actual family if he married Hyewon, his granddaughter whose father was killed by the old king soon after she was born. Namjoon had entertained the thought briefly, but any time he glanced at Hyewon and begged his body to flare up with passion, he only felt a keen sort of indifference.

She was pretty, yes, and underneath her brattiness was a gentle heart.

Namjoon would eat her alive, scare her so much that he might leave invisible scars that would change her entirely. It took a certain sort of person to see Namjoon's darkness and not run away. He'd found that in Jin, who held darkness of his own.

How could he put all of that into words so that Lord Woo or Hoseok understood?

He couldn't. All he could do was begrudgingly agree.

"Fine," Namjoon jerked away from Hoseok, looked to Lord Woo with pleading eyes. The lie weighed heavy on his tongue. "I'll let him go. But you must give me until the coronation. You've already asked so much. You owe me this much, at least."

Lord Woo crossed his arms over his chest and looked Namjoon over, assessing. Finally, he gave a curt nod.

"Summon a scribe. We'll start drafting Lord Jeon's invitation as we speak, insisting he bring the newlyweds."

"A jail cell suits you, Uncle," Yoongi announced, covering his mouth with a handkerchief to cough. The air was dank and musty, smelling of human shit and rot. The perfect place for an asshole like his uncle to spend the rest of his days.

It had taken months to find proof of the old alpha's misdeeds, but Yoongi had eventually succeeded in providing enough evidence to force the other minor lords and ladies to convict the man, sentencing him to a lifetime in prison for his crimes against the Min family and name.

His uncle only cackled. "Is that what you really think? That I'm the bad guy here? Ha! You're a fool, just like your father was!"

"Don't talk about my father! You have no right!" Yoongi snapped. "And you're not free of guilt. All of the estate records show you've been filtering money into your own accounts, bit by bit each year. You've stolen over ten million won from me, would've gotten even more if I hadn't been freed by the Uprising. How can you act like you're innocent?"

The old man frowned, cocking his head to the side. "Ten million won is spare change to you," he scoffed. "You merely wanted to make an example of me, to take back control of the estate. I see right through you."

"And I see through you, Uncle!" Yoongi spat. "I'm no longer a little boy, hiding behind you, scared of my own shadow. You're a vile, despicable man, and if I had gotten enough evidence to prove you killed my father, we wouldn't even be having this conversation right now. Your head would be rotting on a spike outside my castle."

His uncle shook his head. "You can't still think that I killed him. After all this time, too? He was my *brother*."

"Oh, yes!" Yoongi hissed, rolling his eyes. "And we all know how important family is to you."

The omega shivered, thinking of the way his uncle's eyes had looked that night so long ago, the way he had reached out, the feel of his hands everywhere. It was enough to make Yoongi sick, even now.

“The old king helped you with it, I know that much. He wanted to make an example of my father, and using you as the pawn to get rid of him was the perfect plan. You were supposed to get the estate after, right? Since I, an omega, was the only heir? But that didn’t happen. The king acknowledged my claim and forgot all about you. When you attacked me and the Crown Prince, he wiped his hands clean entirely.”

“You poor, dumb boy. You think you know what happened that night your father died, but you don’t. Not really.”

“Oh? And what really did happen, hmm?” Yoongi asked, leveling his uncle with a glare.

The old alpha kept silent, looking away to stare at the wall of his cell. “I can’t tell you,” was all he said.

“Why not?”

“I can’t tell you that either.”

Yoongi clenched his hands into fists, though they ached in response, muscles and bones still not completely healed. He relaxed them immediately. “Then have fun talking to yourself for the rest of your days,” Yoongi spat. “Mayhaps I’ll visit on your birthdays just to torment you.”

With that, he left his uncle behind, glad to be rid of the man whose very existence had tormented him so much these past few years. As he exited the Min family dungeons, a guard greeted him, letters in hand.

“Lord Min! There’s two from the palace, General Jung and Captain Joon, and another from Lord Jeon. The messenger told me to give them to you right away. Also,” the guard leaned over, hand guarding his mouth as he whispered, “the lady has arrived. She’s been escorted to the guest room, but -”

“Have her brought to my rooms,” Yoongi instructed, taking the letters in hand as he pulled away from the guard. He looked to Jeon’s letter, taking note of the elaborate decoration, the swirling red and gold penmanship. It felt like a stone had dropped in his stomach, knowing what the letter might contain. “It seems we might have to make use of her sooner rather than later.”

Now that he’d put his uncle in jail and taken the headship as his own, been acknowledged by his vassals, shouldn’t he have been happy? He could go back to the palace now, back to Hoseok. But he couldn’t feel entirely happy, knowing with dread that a storm awaited him at the palace, an ugly, brutal one that threatened to tear apart everything in its wake.

There was a sort of restlessness in the palace, servants bustling to and fro. Even Young Mistress Min was on edge, barking at everyone in a tone much fiercer than usual. It reminded Jin of the same energy that had consumed them when they’d readied for the festival, except this occasion was more grand, more regal than that.

A coronation was to be taking place in a month’s time. The young mistress had made the announcement to all the kitchen servants, informing them that the entire Bangtan court would be in attendance. Lord Jeon would be returning with his sons, and Lord Min would be coming with a guest of his own.

Min Duran didn’t seem too excited about that last part, perhaps afraid her cousin would take over her position.

"I just can't wait to serve a bunch of stuck-up nobles," Suran sighed sarcastically as her and Jin worked together preparing today's lunch. "Well, even more of them than usual."

Jin's lips quirked. "Indeed."

Internally, he was screaming. There would be no time left when Lord Min arrived, when Jeon brought Taehyung to the palace as well. His hands shook at the thought of what was to come, of how hard it would be to hide from all the nobles who gathered together in one place, when it was his job to serve them.

"We're cooks now, right? Surely, we won't have to serve them directly," he remarked, a little helplessly.

Suran turned to the head cook and asked as much, to which the beta shook his head. "There's too many of them!" the man sighed. "I'm afraid everyone will have to pitch in a little."

"Great," Jin gritted his teeth, turning back to the carrots he was chopping.

He thought of meeting Yoongi or Taehyung, but he couldn't tell which one angered him more. His rage at Yoongi had abated slightly, especially when he thought of the omega's mangled, bleeding fingers. Taehyung was another story. Taehyung, his precious little brother who had thrown everything away at the first smell of some omega's slick. This changed things irrevocably, altered Jin's plans in a way he had not foreseen.

"Jin!" Suran yelled, alarmed. "What did that poor carrot do to you?"

With a huff, Jin paused in his chopping, looking down at the orange, pulpy mess. "Oh," he noted, a little surprised. He hadn't thought he was chopping that viciously.

Suran shook her head. "Taking your feelings out on the food is never good, Jin," she reprimanded. "You know I'm always here if you need to talk."

Jin ducked his head. "Of course. Sorry, I just...wasn't thinking."

He'd been lost in thoughts, mind swirling with questions as to why his beloved brother would betray him so easily, mating one of the men responsible for the downfall of their dynasty.

Why are you so angry, a traitorous voice whispered in his head. You've spread your legs for one of those men yourself, let his fingers and tongue inside of you. How is it any different?

For good reason, Jin argued back. It's not like I actually like the man, like I plan to mate him.

It was a weak, unconvincing argument, and Jin didn't even believe it himself. He merely pushed his feelings away, refused to see the truth. It was easier to be mad at Taehyung, who had mated himself to Lord Jeon's whore of a son, who had thrown away everything Jin had been working towards the last few months. Jin's hands clenched around his kitchen knife, and he had to wonder if that meant everything was meaningless now, rendered useless by Taehyung's careless actions.

"My brother's gotten himself a mate," Jin said randomly. Suran turned to look at him, giving him her full attention though her hands never stopped kneading the bread dough.

"Someone he was not supposed to marry," the omega continued.

"And why not? Are they of a lower caste?" Suran asked, no judgement visible on her face.

"I suppose you can say that," Jin breathed. He scooped his cubed carrots into the bowl, then picked up more to chop. "It infuriates me."

"Because he should not have done such a thing, he should not have - "

Betrayed me, Jin wanted to say. But that sounded too childish, even to his own ears.

Suran paused, palms dug deep within the dough. She squinted, taking in Jin's expression, gaze moving across his face and down to the tenseness of his posture. "Are your parents angry?" she questioned, tilting her head to the side.

"Our parents are dead," Jin replied flippantly. "There's no one left but us. And he - "

"Went against your wishes? Or against what your parents would have wanted?"

"No, it's just..." Jin searched for the words, the right way of getting his feelings across.

"Not fair," he settled on.

"Ah," Suran replied, as if that explained everything. She turned back to her bread and began to hum a tune.

"Ah what?" Seokjin asked. He pointed his knife at her, though it was far from threatening. "What are you thinking?"

Suran smiled. "I just find it interesting. I never thought I'd see you like this. Jealous, that is."

That one word had Seokjin pausing, and in a split second, his expression closed off into something tight and unreadable. Jealous...of Taehyung?

Taehyung, the golden son, the alpha that had all of their father's love - when by all rights, there should be none of that to give - the boy who wrapped the entire palace staff around his little finger, who asked for a toy and had it delivered within a day's time. Their father never laid a hand on Taehyung, never made him watch the flames swallow prisoners and traitors and innocents alike.

That Taehyung?

He thought of the little boy that looked up at him so long ago, reaching his chubby fists out so that Jin might hold him up to watch the fireworks. Jin's lips had quivered, hands clenching at his side as he seethed, because this boy would be his undoing, this boy would be taking everything from him. But the little thing smiled with a toothy grin, calling out "Seokjinnie-hyung" so lovingly - how could he deny him affection?

Taehyung was his whole world once he came to the palace, the only friend Jin allowed himself to have, partly because he knew his father would not burn this one alive like he had the last. Revenge had been the reason Jin had come back here to the palace, but it was Taehyung whose future he was fighting for.

"I think that your brother, if he's happy with his mate, would want you to be happy, too, Jin," Suran offered, breaking Jin out of his reverie.

Happiness, Jin thought. *What exactly is that?*

Was it the feeling he'd gotten after outsmarting one of the nobles in his father's court, or the way his spine had tingled when he'd stuck a shard in Woo Beomseok's throat? No, that wasn't

happiness. It was -

The feel of a rough hand over his own, the smell of smoke and burning pine, Joon's dimpled smile as he told Jin about the latest philosopher he'd been reading, the way he took Jin's face in his hands, peppered kisses across his cheeks and made him laugh.

- being loved.

That was happiness.

Joon did not know Prince Seokjin, but he accepted Jin, the omega with no titles or money or even beauty anymore really. He saw the dark twisted parts of Jin that usually had people running away and he stayed.

Would it really be so bad? that same voice whispered. *He is a kind man. A loving man. Surely, he would not bring us dishonor if...*

Jin's stomach clenched. He could not risk it. Besides, Captain Joon was engaged, if Woo Beomseok's words were to be believed. It was something he had not let himself think of, only because the sharp pain it brought him.

"Happiness is not forever," Jin reasoned, going back to his work. "So what's the point in indulging. It'll only cause you grief in the end."

"Not always," Suran said wistfully. "And even if it does, then isn't that fleeting happiness worth it, rather than to not know happiness at all?"

It sounded like something from one of Joon's plays he loved so much to read to Jin. The omega had to laugh deeply, the pain in his stomach nearly bringing tears to his eyes. "Oh, Suran. If only it could be that easy."

Yet her words had fed his traitorous thoughts, had given them reason to hope, and though Jin did not quite know it yet, the wisps of a plan were beginning to form. A selfish, fulfilling plan that cared not for family or revenge or even a birthright.

And Jin himself would pay the great cost of it.

Jimin was moping around when Jin came back to their quarters, his eyes still puffy and red from the night before. "You had a box delivered to you," he told Jin, greeting the older omega with a hug. "One of the messengers brought it by earlier."

Jin gave a hum, patting the other man's head lightly. He sat on down on his bed. "And why are you back so early, hmm? Did Lady Jeon kick you out?"

Jimin let go of him reluctantly, handing the box over. "She said I was..." he sniffled. "Ruining the mood, I think? Whatever, I was glad to be rid of her anyways. Everything in that wing is just...a reminder of Tae."

Jin clicked his tongue. "Don't cry for an alpha that doesn't care for you. It's a waste. You have that guard or soldier who fancies you, don't you? Just go after him."

Jimin fixed him with a glare. "It's not that easy, and you know it!" he snapped.

Jin sighed, putting his package to the side. "Here," he patted his lap. "Come on!"

Jimin scooted over on the bed, burying his face in the older omega's lap. "I just don't understand!" he said, voice muffled. "What does Jeongguk have that I don't?"

"Well," Jin started. "He probably didn't refuse Taehyung when he asked him to get married. You know. Like you did."

Jimin screamed into Jin's thighs. "I wouldn't have done it, not if I had known - UGH, that scheming witch! I bet this was her plan all along! I wouldn't be surprised if she was the witness to their marriage ceremony!"

Jimin lifted his head up, scowling, and took the pillow that Jin offered him, setting it to the side where he then proceeded to beat it again and again and again with his tiny, but powerful fists.

"Yerin is a witch in spirit, yes, but I doubt she would have supported Taehyung in this," Jin remarked, voice dark. "He's in Lord Jeon's clutches now, far away from her protection."

"Whatever, it's my fault anyway! This is karma, laughing at me right now!"

Jin frowned, furrowing his brow. "What do you mean?"

Jimin sniffled. "I served Jeongguk, before he left on his mission, and I was awful to him, pretended to be his friend and rejected him. But it was only because I had thought - all the rumors told me he killed Taehyung! What was I supposed to believe? How could I just look my lover's killer in the eyes and not think a single nasty thought?"

Jin shushed him, the information nothing new or noteworthy. "Hush now, Jimin. That's normal! If anything, I admire you. I know without a doubt that if anything happened to Joon, I'd kill the person responsible. It takes a lot, I think, to not lash out at the people responsible for hurting us."

Your soul is purer than mine, Jin thought but did not say.

Jimin gave one more sniffle, then looked up at Jin in confusion. "Joon? Captain Joon?"

He scrambled away from Jin, in shock, mouth gaping open. "You've been seeing Captain Joon? I thought you gave up on that, once you learned he was one of the Bangtan Four."

Jin paled. "It's nothing," he waved his hands. "I just decided I might take your advice! I bled, and so I might be due for a heat someday. I might as well take a partner like you said, right?"

He tried to excuse the relationship as nothing more than that, as if he was just finding the right heat partner to take to bed. But shouldn't his first instinct have been to just tell the truth, that it was all pretend, that he didn't care for Captain Joon and this was all part of his plan to get revenge?

Unless that wasn't the truth. The truth was that...Joon made him happy. How could he tell Jimin something like that?

"You're no better than Taehyung then!" Jimin scoffed. "What was it you said when I told you the news? 'Fraternalizing with the enemy', you called it! Ha, and you were so angry, too! Like me! But you've been sneaking around, fucking one of the Four Pillars, just like Taehyung."

"I haven't fucked Joon," Jin hissed. "Even if I did, it's none of your business!"

Jimin turned away. "I just think it's funny. That's all. Captain Joon is supposed to be engaged anyways, haven't you heard that?"

“And Taehyung’s already mated and married. Is that going to stop you from loving him?”

Jimin uncrossed his arms, turned back around slowly to stare at Jin. “You...you’re saying...that you..”

Jin flushed. “That’s not what I’m saying at all!” he protested.

A voice spoke up, weak and tired. “Can you guys stop fighting? That’s all you do anymore.”

Both of their heads snapped to the doorway, where Ru was entering, looking haggard and exhausted. Gone were most of the marks, mere lines traced across her skin now, and she hid the tearing on her scalp with a simple headscarf. Jin looked to Jimin, who appeared similarly shamefaced.

It was odd, how often they became angry with each other these days. Always arguing, hardly ever at peace. Jin wondered if it was because they knew each other’s secrets that they fought so often, always on edge with one another, or if was merely the burden itself that weighed down on their friendship. Whatever the case, Jin realized in that moment that it would not do him any good to get on Jimin’s bad side.

“Sorry,” both omegas muttered to each other, at near the exact same time. They laughed a little awkwardly, and Ru smiled, pointing to the box beside Jin.

“What’s that? It’s not often we get letters, let alone deliveries,” she said.

Jin shrugged his shoulders and opened the box without another word, unsure of what he might find inside. He gasped at the sight of what he did find, the beautiful purple stone, swirling as if it contained a thousand hidden galaxies. His hands trembled as he reached out to pick it up, fingers rubbing over the smooth, shiny stone once before turning it over.

There it was. Their names written in Hangul. The characters were not centered however. Rather they were aligned to the right, as if the blank space beside them was reserved for something more, something special. Jin shook his head, felt his eyes burn.

“A necklace?” Jimin gaped. “Is that...from Captain Joon?”

Jin flushed. “Yes,” he admitted. “He had me pick it out around a week or two, I think. I hadn’t thought that it would be done so soon, but here it is.”

“Let me see! Let me see!” Ru crowded over him, eager to get a good look at the necklace. “Oh, Jin! It’s beautiful!”

She held it up to his neck. “And it suits you perfectly. Doesn’t it, Jimin?”

Jimin’s own hands fiddled with his neck, as if he was looking for what should be there, reminded of his own collar. Which Jin didn’t understand because this and that were two different things, right?

“It really does, Jin,” Jimin admired softly. “I hadn’t thought he was that serious about you...to buy you a necklace, that is.”

Ru murmured something about how she still needed to wash up for the night, then hastily gathered her things and left the two of them alone. Perhaps she knew they needed a few more moments to themselves.

"I'm sorry," Jimin apologized once she was gone. "For comparing you to Taehyung. I'm just worried. It's rather...dangerous you know? If Joon makes you happy, though, then you should go for it. The gods know, happiness doesn't last for long."

"Right," Jin agreed. His thumb ran over the engravings of their names one more time, as if he could somehow set it in stone, carve the letters into his own heart.

Your brother would want you to be happy, too, Suran told him.

What we have is untouchable, Joon promised.

He tilted his head back, closed his eyes, and breathed. For some reason, the way was so very clear now. He almost wanted to laugh, but he couldn't. He merely clasped the necklace around his neck and asked Jimin if he might decorate his face for just the night.

Jin wore his uniform when he went to Joon's rooms, not wanting to draw too much attention to himself. The makeup that Jimin had so gleefully put on his face felt thick, though there wasn't even that much there. Just a bit of powder and blush, smokey eyes lined with kohl and lips smudged pink.

"You're even prettier, Jin," Jimin had cooed. "I didn't think that would be possible, but it is."

Jin blushed, hoping that Joon might think the same. He so desperately wanted to fiddle with his necklace, though he kept it hidden from view with the high collar of his uniform. He wanted it to be a pleasant surprise when Joon saw it.

He knocked twice, then paused before giving another knock. It took only a moment more before Joon was opening the door and tugging him inside, clicking the lock in place.

"Ah, is there an even greater need for secrecy tonight?" Jin hummed, throwing his arms around Joon's neck as he placed a kiss on his cheek.

Joon laughed, but it sounded awkward, as if the sound had started to catch in his throat. "Yeah, something like that."

Jin leaned back, watching as Joon's eyes roved over his face, widening in surprise. "You're wearing makeup," he noted, surprised.

Jin smiled shyly, "Do you like it?"

Joon placed a hand on his cheek, nodding his head. "I do," he sighed. "But you're beautiful without it, too. You know that, right?"

Jin scoffed, looking away. "Of course!" he proclaimed, though his cheeks were red. "I'm the most handsome man in the world."

Joon grinned, looking positively enamored as his thumb ran over Jin's scar, which had been concealed by Jimin's makeup. "Is this a special occasion?" he asked, curious. "Is that why you're wearing makeup?"

Jin fidgeted, and he suddenly didn't know what to say. How did he tell Joon what it was that he wanted, without coming across too strong or perhaps wanton? He settled on curling his lips into an unsteady smirk before he kissed the alpha, a long, messy kiss that had Joon groaning into mouth.

When they parted, Jin replied cheekily, "Something like that."

"Jin, I have - no, I need to tell you something," Joon began.

Jin's stomach twisted into knots. Whatever it was, he didn't want to hear it. He thought of Beomseok's sneer, of Jessi's cryptic words, and Jimin's confirmation. Most everybody seemed to know about Joon's engagement except Jin, the omega he was courting. Jin wanted it to stay that way, because it was easier to deny something if you were never told the truth of it.

So he would not listen to Joon, would not give him an opportunity to confess.

If Jin was not told of the engagement, then it did not exist.

Happiness was fleeting, yes, so Jin was bound and determined to have this night, this one night, to themselves. He would not let anything ruin it for them, even if Joon's guilty conscience threatened to make a confession.

Jin tugged Joon forward by his shirt and backed up until he hit the edge of Joon's bed. The omega splayed his legs open as he licked his lips. "Darling, there'll be plenty of time for that later," he drawled, running a finger down Joon's chest slowly, carefully.

"Really, Jin, this can't wait, I swear!" Joon pleaded, though his cheeks were flushed, eyes dark with promise.

Jin smirked, and he fluttered his lashes. He knew how sweet he must look, how much sweeter he must smell. He tugged the high collar of his uniform down and out of the way, displaying the necklace he wore beneath it. Joon's necklace.

"Even for me?" he pouted, foot trailing up Joon's leg before he wrapped his legs around the alpha, pulling him flush to his chest.

Joon growled, and his hands began to work carefully, pulling Jin's hanbok open, uncovering the necklace and white slip beneath. "You're a tease," Joon muttered, kissing his collarbones.

He began a trail upwards, and then stopped as he came to Jin's neck. He fingered the necklace carefully, turning the stone over to see the engraving on the back. Jin hummed pleasantly, squirming as he felt his impatience start to gather. He wanted those hands all over him, cupping his thighs perhaps, not focused on the necklace.

"If I'd known it would have distracted you this easily, I don't think I would've worn it here tonight," Jin sighed.

"Impatient, are we?" Joon teased. He moved his hands down, settling on Jin's hips. "The slip... can I take it off?"

Jin shook his head, perhaps a little too fast. The slip covered his shoulders - more specifically the phoenix - from view. "Just work around it, yeah? Like we've always done."

"Alright," Joon murmured reluctantly, lifting the slip up and exposing Jin's lower half. He licked his lips and leaned down, clearly intending to eat Jin out. The omega put a hand to his chest, stopping him.

"Not yet," Jin said, though he felt slick nearly gush out of him at the thought of having Joon's tongue inside. "I want you, to feel you. If that's ok?"

He stumbled over his words, but lowered his hand to Joon's crotch, cupping the bulge that had

started to form. It was always Joon touching him, showering Jin with praises and touches and love. Jin wanted to do something different tonight, wanted to show Joon just how much he cared for him.

“Of course!” Joon said quickly, eyes lighting up. “I - how do you want me?”

Jin patted the bed, suddenly feeling nervous. “Just sit here.”

Joon obeyed, tugging at the waistband of his pants, and Jin moved over, in front of him as he slid down to his knees in between Joon’s own. It was one of the most submissive actions Jin had ever performed, getting on his knees before an alpha. He ran his hands up and down Joon’s thighs, taking a deep breath. Jin felt himself quiver at merely the thought of taking Joon inside his mouth, let alone inside his cunt.

He wondered if he would be bad at it, if he could somehow imitate the movements that Joon had practiced on Jin’s own cock.

But Joon’s so much bigger, his inner omega crooned, nearly drooling.

“Have you...never done this before?” Joon asked suddenly, tilting his head to the side.

Jin jolted, staring up at Joon with wide, shining eyes. “What,” he said. “N-no. Of course, I have...done this before.”

Joon didn’t appear very convinced, so Jin looked away. The alpha grabbed his chin, however, forcing him to meet his gaze. “You worked at a gisaeng house, didn’t you?” he remarked, leaving no room for argument. “Are you telling me they never made you touch an alpha before?”

Jin whimpered, feeling inexperienced and a little ashamed. He refused to answer Joon, suddenly fearful that he might find out the truth: that Jin had never worked in a gisaeng house at all.

“No way,” Joon muttered to himself, fingers trailing across Jin’s lips, perhaps wanting to slip inside, plunge inside the warm, wet of his mouth that was so much like something else. “And all this time...”

He let go of Jin’s chin hastily, watched as the omega puffed out his cheeks in protest. “I’m not some...chaste virgin!” Jin insisted, fiddling with the fastenings of Joon’s trousers, though that was very much what he was.

He was careful as he pulled Joon out, fingers smoothing over the head. His cock was so thick, dark and flushed. Jin almost whimpered, wondering if he could even fit it inside his mouth at all. Joon’s hand rested on the back of his head, urging him forward. “You can start small,” the alpha instructed, voice a gentle murmur. “Don’t overestimate how much you can take at first.”

Jin nodded. He started out with kitten licks, small and quick as he got a taste of what was to come. He didn’t much like the taste of it, salty and musky as it was, but he could withstand it for Joon. Eventually he wrapped his mouth around the head of Joon’s cock, opening his throat and easing his way down.

Joon groaned, fingers tightening in Jin’s hair. The pain was immediate, blistering along Jin’s scalp, and the omega found that he loved it, giving a whine around Joon’s cock. So when Joon retracted his hand, bringing it back to his side with a muttered apology, Jin withdrew as well.

He fixed Joon with a glare, though he probably looked far from intimidating, eyes dewy, cheeks flushed, and lips slick with spit. “I liked it!” he said. “Why did you stop?”

“Sorry, sorry!” Joon yelped, bringing his hand back to Jin’s head, twisting his fingers in his fine, silky black hair. “I thought I was hurting you.”

You could never hurt me, Jin thought, not knowing how wrong that statement was.

The omega groaned in response to having his hair pulled again and lowered his head, resuming his task eagerly. He bobbed his head up and down, slowly at first, adjusting himself to the feel of it all. He felt something split open in his mind. Jin felt naked, bare, in a way that wasn’t quite physical.

Joon began to speak, panting as he struggled to get the words out. “I was so jealous of them, you know. Those other patrons I thought you’d entertained. But I did think it was odd, because omegas that have been touched had a certain smell to them, traces of their partners almost stuck to their skin. But you didn’t. The only other scent I ever smelled on you was... my own.”

Joon thrust forward, and his cock touched the back of Jin’s throat, nearly triggering the omega’s gag reflex. Jin gave a whine, which encouraged Joon to give another thrust.

“Of course, my nose has never been that great.”

Joon’s tight grip pulled him forward, up and down, and it made Jin feel so used, like a proper omega should. His slip had fallen down once he’d gotten to his knees, covering his lower half again, but it was soaked now, coated in his own slick. His cock even poked out, standing at attention as it smeared precome along the inside of the slip as well.

“Tell me, darling. Which theory of mine is right?” Joon asked, voice so deep and almost mean. He pulled Jin off of his cock, holding his head up and pulling it to the side, exposing his pretty neck and the decoration of Joon’s gift.

Jin gasped, catching his breath for the first few moments, throat swollen and tender, lacking the air he’d been denied. He squirmed and rubbed his body forward against Joon’s leg, hoping that he might find some sort of friction.

“Jin, love,” Joon reminded, pulling his leg away. “You haven’t answered.”

Jin squeezed his eyes shut. His head seemed to be split in two, with his sane, true self buried deep beneath as the omega clawed its way out, whining with only one thing on its mind: a knot. He had to obey his alpha, didn’t he? Had to tell him the truth?

The omega sniffled. “Nobody,” he muttered, voice too low for Joon to hear.

“What was that?” Joon’s grip tightened in his hair.

Jin let out a cry, “Nobody! Nobody but you!”

His alpha’s grip eased.

“Oh, darling,” Joon remarked softly. He leaned forward, rewarding Jin with a few sloppy, heated kisses as he pet Jin’s hair carefully, smoothing down the fine hair that he had mussed. “Will you let me inside tonight? Let me fill you full and paint your walls a pretty white? Hmm?”

“Please,” Jin whimpered, entire body trembling. “Joonie, please!”

The alpha pressed his nose against Jin’s neck, rubbing against the scent glands there. He took a deep breath. “You smell so good, darling. I want to just eat you up.”

Jin gasped, leaning into Joon's touch, eyes fluttering shut. He felt Joon's hands grab his tiny waist hosting him up on top of the alpha's lap. He whined and started to grind against Joon's cock, eager to find his release, but the alpha sighed telling him to wait.

"Let me open you up, baby," Joon insisted. "You're always so tight. I don't want you to bleed."

Jin pouted. "It's fine! I'm so wet already, Joonie! Can't you feel it?"

He canted his hips forward once more, hoping that Joon might feel just how slick he was, might feel the wetness coat his own lower half. Joon lowered one of his hands and rubbed it against Jin's sex, fingers slipping along his folds.

Joon let out a hiss. "What's got you so worked up already?" he murmured. "Did you like the taste of my cock that much?"

He slipped one finger inside easily enough, then another as well. Jin moaned at the feeling of it, of the rough skin rubbing against his walls. It was so much and yet not enough. He needed more, wanted all of Joon inside him.

"I want you inside me," Jin breathed, feeling hot all over, and not even in the way he usually did when intimate with Joon. This was something else, but he didn't acknowledge it, too lost in his inferior headspace. "I want you, Joon. I need you."

The alpha pressed his sweaty forehead against Jin's own. "Are you sure?" he asked. "We can stop now, if - "

Jin nearly growled. "Yes!" he exclaimed. "I am very, very sure. Now if you don't fuck me, then - "

"Then what, love?" Joon asked, mouth curled into a teasing smirk. "Will you use your own fingers instead? You know they won't satisfy you near as good me."

Jin narrowed his eye and let out a breathy laugh, climbing out of Joon's lap and removing his fingers in the process. He settled on the bed, on his hands and knees, and threw his head back to give Joon a sultry stare. "Maybe I will. Maybe I'll tie you to the bed and make you watch me. Won't let you touch until you've been a good boy."

Joon snarled, turning around and grabbing for the omega, who only tittered and scooted away. Slowly, Jin unlatched the necklace wound around his throat, depositing it on the bedside table off to the side. He rubbed his hand against his scent glands, fluttering his lashes as more pheromones leaked out.

"Well, Joon, what's it gonna be?" Jin mocked, lips curling into a grin.

In a split second, Joon was on him, decorating his neck with a thousand different lovebites and kisses. Jin laughed, feeling ticklish as Joon's teeth barely grazed the tops of his shoulders.

"Ah, Joonie, not too close, remember?" he murmured, dragging the alpha away from the "gisaeng" mark on his back and back in for a kiss.

Jin had mentioned it in passing, that he did not ever want Joon to see his back. He was too ashamed, he reasoned, not ready for that yet. And Joon, though he perhaps thought it silly, agreed.

Joon made sure Jin was properly situated among the pillows, continuing to play the role of caring alpha. "You'll tell me if it hurts," he commanded, "or if you want to stop at anytime."

The omega nodded his head frantically. “Yes, I will! Just please, please, please!”

“Be patient,” Joon chided, spreading Jin’s legs.

Jin wanted to roll his eyes, but refrained.

“Aren’t I *always*?” the omega let out a shriek near the end as Joon entered him, cock impossibly thick and hot as he forced his way inside. Jin squeezed his eyes shut, expression twisted into one of pain. It hurt more than Jin thought it would, but he mentally chided himself. Slick, no matter how much of it he produced, was not a miracle cure. There was sure to be some pain, especially when - if - Joon knotted him.

You’re not in heat, though, Jin told himself. So don’t worry about that.

It took a while for Jin to adjust, until finally he let out the breath he didn’t know he was holding, relaxing his muscles just a little more.

“Ok?” Joon asked, hands cradling his hips. He’d remained still, probably fighting against the urge to just thrust in again and again, without a care in the world for Jin’s comfort.

Jin jerked his head. “Yeah,” he breathed. “I’m ok. You can...move now.”

And Joon did. He took it slow at first, cock dragging against Jin’s walls and nearly catching on his rim each time. Jin whimpered, letting out moans when Joon thrust particularly deep inside of him. It felt so good, so much better than Jin could have even imagined. He opened, let Joon inside, and it was like there was a part of him - a missing empty part - that was being filled.

Yet it still wasn’t enough.

“Joonie, neck!” Jin whined, making a wild grab for the alpha’s scarf.

Joon pulled away, as if burned. “No!” he snarled, so harshly that Jin cowered back against the pillows, eyes wide and frightened.

Joon tugged the scarf back tight against his neck, then looked at Jin, expression softening in an instant. “Jin, Jinnie. I’m sorry. But you remember, right? Scars. Just like your shoulder.”

Slowly, the omega gave a nod, unfurling himself from his fetal position and opening his arms for Joon to come back in for a hug. The omega still felt hurt, at a loss because Joon could mark up his neck and scent him as he liked, but Jin could not do the same for Joon.

Because he has a fiance, that same, ugly voice whispered. He can’t come back to them smelling like you.

Jin, however, was used to ignoring that voice.

The alpha began to rock against him, slow and steady, hitting somewhere deep, deep inside of Jin each time. There was nothing brutal about this, every movement languid and patient, as if knowing they had all the time in the world. When really that was not the case.

Jin reached out his hand, but this time, it was not Joon’s neck he wanted, but the alpha’s own hand, resting in his own. Joon understood immediately. As if in penance for the previous transgression, he threaded their fingers together, sweaty palms joined as one.

“Shit, Jin, I’m going to - “ Joon started to pull away.

“No!” Jin wrapped his legs around the alpha, refusing to let him spill outside. “You can’t! You told me, remember!”

Joon looked a little lost, confused and anxious.

“You’d paint me,” Jin grabbed his face, turning it towards his own, whispered against his lips. “A pretty white, right?”

“Shit,” Joon muttered.

It seemed he couldn’t refuse Jin, especially not when he’d promised the omega that very thing. He thrust inside one final time, making Jin see stars as something hot and wet filled him, fed his greedy hole.

Jin shivered, entire body trembling as he let out a whine so much louder than the rest, felt the sound vibrate in his chest, rattle his bones and skull alike. He felt himself spurt across his own stomach, ruining his poor slip even more. The whine only continued when he felt something thicker begin to form inside of him, and Joon tensed, suddenly panicking.

“Jin, I’m sorry, I didn’t think, I didn’t mean for this,” Joon started to babble out apologies left and right as his knot filled Jin, tying them together for at least a few hours.

The omega merely laid there, panting as he felt his stomach begin to fill with it, Joon’s seed locked inside. He felt warm, perhaps even warmer than before, and he lifted Joon’s hand to his lips, pressing a kiss to each one of the alpha’s gnarled knuckles.

“It’s fine, Joonie,” he murmured, laying his head back against the pillows, eyes fluttering shut. “Feels good, you know?”

Joon sighed, visibly relieved as he stared down at Jin. “You’re a treasure, my treasure. I...I really do - “

Jin did not hear whatever it was he was trying to say, for the omega drifted off to sleep that very moment, far too content and sated to stay awake.

By the time Jin woke up, Joon’s knot had deflated and the alpha had cleaned the two of them up, most likely with a washcloth or rag. Though Jin’s slip was ruined, the alpha had left it on, mindful of the omega’s wishes for his back to go unseen. The alpha was currently cuddled up against Jin, arms wrapped around his waist and nose tucked in the junction between his neck and shoulder.

Jin did not feel terribly different, now that his purity was gone, that he had lost all worth to any potential suitors. It did not matter to him, though, and Jin found that he did not care because he had Joon. How could Jin possibly accept anyone else from now on? Joon had ruined him for anyone else, in more ways than one.

The omega slowly shuffled out of Joon’s hold, the embrace far too hot and tight for him to enjoy. He sat up in bed, sheets spilling off of his shoulders. Jin fanned his face a little, though he realized the flush was not just from the heat, but embarrassment as well. His cunt ached, but it was the pleasant sort of pain, and Jin still felt Joon inside of him, warm and sticky. He thought of how wanton he had acted, how submissive and yet arrogant at times, and it almost made him dizzy.

He wanted to squeal into a pillow, but refrained so that he would not wake Joon.

Joon, who was sleeping so peacefully, face relaxed in such a way that Jin had never seen before.

The slope of his nose, angle of his jaw, width of his mouth...His hands itched to reach out and trace them. Jin wanted to commit each feature to memory, besotted with such simple things.

How would it feel to wake up next to him each day? To wear his mark on my neck and call him mine?

Yet Jin's eyes caught on that scarf, that ugly scarf, the thing that stopped him from properly scenting Joon as he should, from sinking his teeth into the glands that were hidden from view.

Something niggled at the back of his mind, a warning and yet a curiosity. Jin, though he had been tempered by Joon's attentions, still remained the same selfish person he'd always been. It was his own fault that he could not leave Joon's neck alone, that he did not respect the alpha's wishes as he should have. He already felt as if he knew Joon well enough, could accept him, scar and all. What kind of scar would be so ugly that Joon felt he had to hide it from Jin still, even now? There was nothing about Joon that Jin might refuse to care for, and the scars on his hands hadn't scared him away. This scar would be no different.

He was Psyche, curious and untrusting as he exposed Eros's secret, except there was no candlestick to bare it. Just Jin's fingers, gently, ever so carefully pinching the edge of Joon's scarf and pulling it down a centimeter or so, revealing his neck.

And the worlds of Park Jin and Prince Seokjin collided.

A sudden pain, a cracking that split his soul open, stabbed his heart and let the blood flow, memories spilling out and coloring his vision.

White daffodils, soft petals unfurling as the little boy brandished them in his chubby hands, smiling toothily at Seokjin.

"For you!" he shoved them forward into Seokjin's waiting hands. The glaring rays of the sun covered the upper half of his face but the mark on his neck showed clear for all to see.

He'll be an omega, Seokjin had thought. He'll have to be if he wants to be mine. Because Father said I will be an alpha!

He'd playfully bitten his neck, a tickling sensation that had sent the boy into peals of laughter. "Seokjinnie," he cried. "Stop it!"

Seokjin had grinned, feeling merciful, and pressed a kiss to the top of his head. "Alright, alright," he sighed. "Anything for you."

His first friend, his beloved cousin.

His fiancée, though his mother had told him not to tell anyone that. She'd had that witch bind their hands together, chanted some sort of spell over them. It bonded them slightly, she said. An engagement of sorts. Seokjin felt feelings not his own sometimes, emotions and memories he did not understand, and so he felt it when the little boy died.

When his tiny charred lungs breathed their last, when his throat closed tight around nothing but grey smoke. Seokjin felt it all.

The petals spilled over Seokjin's hands, speckled black and red from the stain of his own skin. An invisible fire appeared and they blackened, curling in on themselves and crumbling into a pile of ash. Long, sharp claws grabbed Seokjin from behind, digging into his shoulders, and his father laughed, an echoing cackle that rang in his ears.

“Listen to them scream, my son!” the king ordered, more like a demon than a human, a fire raging in his eyes. “This is the fate that awaits all who refute my claim to the throne!”

Seokjin stared at his hands, heard the blood curdling cries from his cousins, his family. He smeared the ashes of the petals and pressed a finger to his throat which felt far too tight, fiddling for the collar he’d hidden under his robes. His chest was full, eyes stinging with tears and smoke.

He’d screamed and cried and ran from his father, who sent guards to fetch him back, pulling him away from the swirling inferno that was the Kim estate.

They kept watch till it was nothing more than cinders, to make sure that they were all dead.

No one moved from the rubble, all of them dust and ashes. Dead and buried.

Right?

He saw the collar, remembered putting it away under his mattress. All he felt was shame when he looked at it. Shame and loss, the grief tugging at his tender little heart. Seokjin learned he could not have friends in this world. If he did, the king would just have them killed.

Just like he did -

His name. Why couldn’t he remember his name?

He’d promised to marry that boy, so why had he forgotten?

Joon, Seokjin thought helplessly. *His name was -*

“Come here, Namjoon,” his mother had crooned, beckoning the boy to her bedside. “You’ll look after my poor, lovely boy now, won’t you?”

She pressed a wrinkled finger against his neck, trailing over the phoenix that stretched its wings there.

Seokjin mirrored her movement from so long ago, finger just barely grazing Kim Namjoon’s skin. He felt the sharp static as something clicked into place, just as it had at the festival months ago. He’d touched Namjoon’s neck then, too. His chest felt tight, and suddenly, he couldn’t breathe. Before he knew it, there were tears running down his cheeks. How odd. Seokjin hadn’t thought he could cry.

He’d forgotten Namjoon’s name because he’d wanted to forget. Forgotten about his first friend because it had caused him too much pain. He drew his hand away from Joon - no, Namjoon! - cradled it to his chest, as if burned.

Suddenly so many things made sense, when he knew to look for them. Joon and Namjoon, the names so similar and yet different. The scars across Joon’s hands from the fire so long ago. Of course Joon had risen from the dead. He would have had to, because Kim Namjoon died that night. Lord Woo saved him, the same Lord Woo who vouched for the Kim heir that they’d pulled out of thin air, the Bangtan court’s candidate for king.

They were one and the same. Seokjin had spread his legs for the very same man who was set to take his throne.

He wanted to laugh, but he was already crying. He stood, swaying as he did so, felt his eyes threaten to roll to the back of his head, but he could not faint. Not right now. He needed to get out

of here, away from Kim Namjoon's slumbering, peaceful form.

The alpha's forehead wrinkled, nose twitching, as if he might be picking up on the distress Seokjin was emitting, but the omega would not allow him to wake. Seokjin could not face him like this, when his lower half still throbbed from their coupling and his mind was mush from the revelation.

Seokjin gathered his uniform and threw it on haphazardly, movements clumsy and slow.

Had Namjoon known, all this time? There was no Captain Joon, just as there was no kitchen servant named Park Jin. They were both liars, but if Namjoon had been aware of Jin's identity from the start, then the deceit had been purposeful.

Seokjin could not bear it if he had known.

He felt his ugly, withered heart, already bruised from Taehyung's betrayal, crumple in on itself even more. It had just learned how to breathe, to open up its vulnerable vessels and pulse. Now everything came to a halt as the blows struck it, and the walls came back down.

Suddenly he felt embarrassed, ashamed, and foolish, all of those things at once, and he crumpled in on himself, leaning over to clutch at his chest, feel his nails dig into the skin there. He felt hot all over, and his mind was a mess. His breaths were coming too fast, like too hot, uneven pants.

He'd forgotten some of his father's lessons, had not guarded his heart as he should have. He'd let himself become weak, had lowered his defenses and let people inside. Never again, he promised, though the pitiful omega inside cried out in protest.

He did the only thing he could do, the only power left to him in that moment. He ran away.

Chapter End Notes

seokjin knows joon is kim namjoon...honestly nobody voted for just him on the poll and i was kind of shocked lol
what do you think will happen next? :>

u can thank thanksgiving break and the snow day i had today that helped me churn out this update!! :))

pls follow me on twitter @SeleneIlene if you want fic updates or to interact at all!!
occasionally i have polls asking for readers' thoughts because i love hearing from you guys :) i think i'm private rn, but i'll be going public here in a bit. (basically an IRL was being annoying so i had to private like everything...including this fic and p&w for a while)... oof!

Also, i am considering incorporating pomegranates & wine into this fic, as in changing the tenses and putting the two chapters where they should go. I was thinking of this ever since i finished the taekook side story and it came out a lot shorter than i expected...then i got a comment that kind of irritated me so that kind of cemented my decision :/ just wanted to let you guys know so if you see two chapter updates right in a row and have already read pomegranates and wine then you can just ignore them. :)

as always, thank you so much for reading, and pls, pls, pls feel free to leave kudos or a

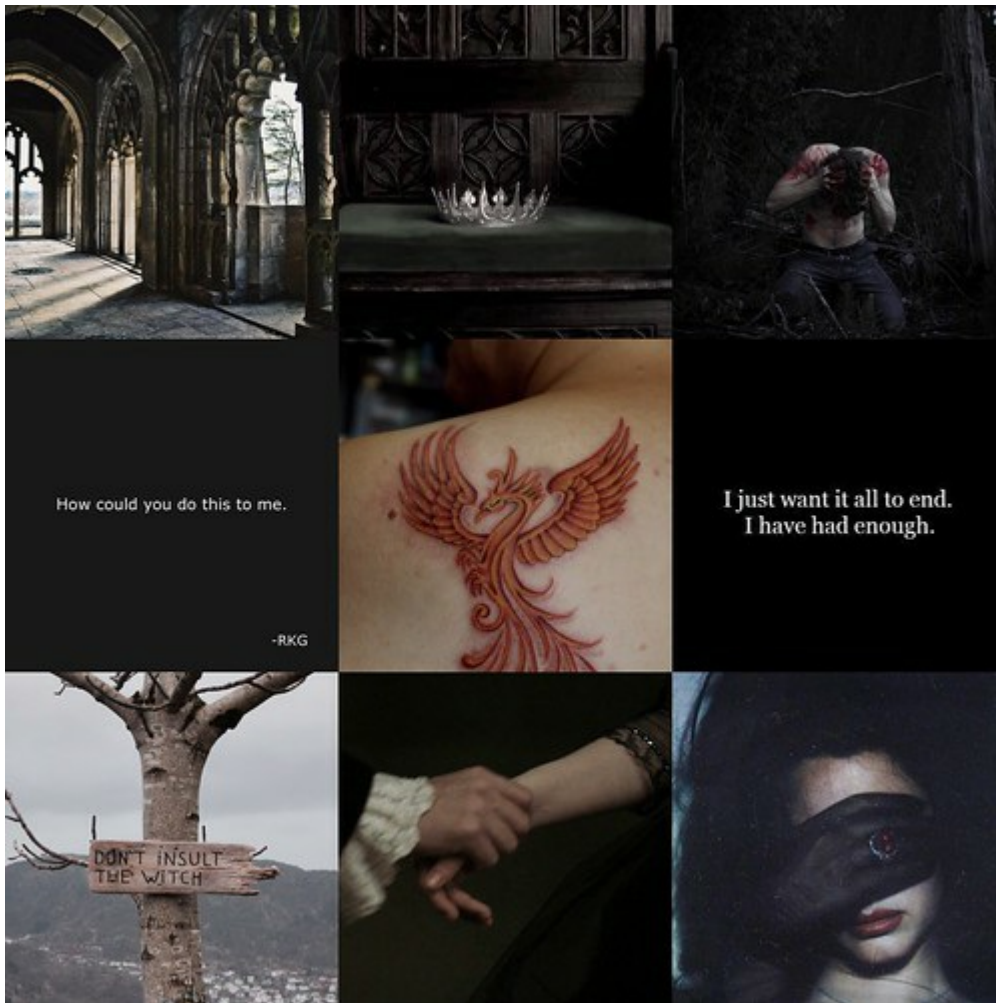
comment if you enjoyed it in any way at all!! love you guys!!

Masks Crushed Underfoot

Chapter Summary

Prince Seokjin meets King Namjoon. King Namjoon meets Prince Seokjin.

Chapter Notes



warnings: planned nonconsensual bonding, ex: namjoon thinks v manipulative thoughts in this chapter and has plans that are along the lines of what happened in pomegranates (& wine), though they go unfulfilled. also tae acts like a brat and brief allusions to decapitation, murder and torture are made.

the title of this is a phrase from my erased fanfic :>

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It was Ru who found him, crying and whimpering outside the door, too weak to even turn the door handle. She sniffed, sensitive nose scenting the air, then let out a gasp.

“Oh, Jinnie,” she said sorrowfully, before she helped haul him inside. She put a hand to his forehead, shaking her head. Tears gathered in her eyes, and Seokjin wanted so very badly to tell her there was no need for that, but he couldn’t even properly form the words.

Not when that thing was back, lurking behind him and crooning beside his ear, touch burning hot all over him. He felt its claws wrap around his throat, tearing the scream out before it could escape so that the only sound Seokjin made was a silent wailing.

Hello, friend, the demon from his dreams said. *How long it must have been.*

His phoenix was screeching, talons pierced into his skin as the flames flickered close, head pounding. He heard another voice, soft and gentle and so familiar it broke his heart.

It’s okay, Seokjin, his mother told him, appearing like a shade. Her eyes were a piercing silver, which didn’t make sense. Before they had been golden. Hadn’t they?

It didn’t matter. It had been so long since he’d seen her.

She reached out a hand and Seokjin remembered crumpled, bruised fingers, stretched out in a silent plea. (*Help*, the woman had whispered. *Help, you’ve got to get me out of here before he comes back!*)

Seokjin leaned forward into her touch, cold hand cupping his cheek.

Fall, she instructed.

And Seokjin, dutiful son that he was, obeyed.

It passed in a blur. Ru and the others told him he was delirious for two days straight, rambling on and on about nothing and yet everything. Seokjin huddled on his bed, covered in sweat-soaked sheets, cold and hot, broken and whole.

“What did I say?” Seokjin asked, voice scratchy from all of the screaming.

Ru and Jimin shared a look, but Leah let out a laugh, though it sounded forced and awkward. “Something about a crown? You said this guy was gonna take it away...I don’t really know.”

“You wanted your mother, I think!” Minwoo piped up. “You kept telling her you were sorry. Nobody really understood anything that you were saying, though, so we didn’t really notice much.”

“Ah,” Seokjin said.

He thought of the dream, of the cracks in the wall inside of his head. There were so many memories spilling out now, leaking like water from a dam, and Seokjin struggled to keep them straight. He had remembered so much while he was under, and yet learned nothing at all.

He placed a hand to his forehead, which pounded even still. Was this the madness that had taken his father, seeking Seokjin as its next victim? He could barely breathe, afraid his chest might burst, heart falling forth.

“What happened?” Jimin murmured.

Seokjin turned to look at him. Something wet slid down his cheek.

“Nothing, nothing at all. I’ve simply...opened my eyes, after a very long time,” he did not dare say

much, for the others who did not know were still in the room. Leah and Ru perhaps could be trusted, but Seokjin knew not of the other two boys.

“If Joon calls for me,” he announced, “tell him that I don’t want to see him.”

Ru frowned. “Is there a reason?”

“No reason,” Seokjin lied. “I’ve just grown tired of him. That’s all.”

There was unease written across all of their faces, knowing his words to be a lie, but they did not call him out on him. Seokjin was grateful for their silence.

Seokjin returned to work the next day, but evaded any messages sent his way, hiding from the messengers with Suran’s help. Any time they came, Suran told them Seokjin was out delivering or clearing food. None of the messengers seemed that determined to challenge the beta’s words, especially once she’d fixed them with a frosty glare, and so for the first few days Seokjin did not have to worry about Namjoon.

In fact, he tried to forget him.

The sound of his voice, the feel of his skin, the taste and smell of him - Seokjin needed to forget it, needed to smother the yearning within him that begged to see Namjoon again, the inner omega who promised their alpha could make everything feel better again.

It worked as well as it could. Namjoon came to the omegas’ quarters once, but Jimin had sent him on his way, saying that Seokjin was sick and could not greet him. Seokjin knew that he was running out of time, and as the week passed, he knew he would have to say something to the alpha eventually. He could not let on that he knew the truth, in case Namjoon called quits to his game and had him imprisoned or something much worse.

It was good then, that Namjoon himself came to the kitchens. Seokjin was surprised how determined he was to see him. He had not expected the alpha to go that far. This was the reason he did not first notice him arrive. Only when his nose picked up on that familiar burning scent did he look up from his work, thinking he might have burnt the bread, only to find Namjoon standing before him.

“Joon,” he said, surprised.

Namjoon gave him a sort of half-smile. “Can we talk, Jin?” he asked, voice soft and sad.

Suran wiped her hands clean and nudged Seokjin’s arm. “I can take over,” she murmured. “You go have your talk.”

Seokjin ducked his head, thanking her with a smile, though he felt like rocks had begun to gather in his stomach. Joon grabbed his hand, fingers threading through his own, and led him out into the hallway.

“Are you okay?” the alpha started.

Seokjin blinked. “What do you mean?”

Namjoon let go of him, hand falling to the side as he shook his head helplessly. “You ran away and...you haven’t wanted to see me since. Did I do something wrong? I know I said some things and that I might have come on too strong but - “

“No,” Seokjin interrupted. “You didn’t do anything wrong.”

Except exist.

Seokjin sighed, closing his eyes. “This is a me problem, Joon. I...I just need some time.”

Namjoon did not look entirely convinced, just kept looking at him sadly.

“It’s too much, darling. I can’t...not now...just, please give me time. Alright?” Jin pleaded, and it was not a lie. Not entirely.

“Are you sure?” Namjoon needed reassurance. He frowned, and he looked so very gentle and soft, nothing like a bloodthirsty alpha who’d come back from the dead. He reminded Seokjin of the little Namjoon he’d used to know, who always begged for praise and pats and hugs.

“I’m sure,” Seokjin lied as he forced himself to smile.

Namjoon leaned forward, pressing a chaste kiss to Seokjin’s forehead, and left with one final sorrowful look.

Seokjin watched him go, knowing that this was the last time he would speak with him. Seokjin had to leave after all. That was the only way out for him now. The coronation was in two weeks, and all of the rebels would be gathered in one place to laugh at him. Yoongi and Lord Woo and General Jung and Jeon Jeongguk, all of them laughing at the silly omega prince who spread his legs for his own usurper.

Seokjin would not stay to be ridiculed, to be exposed to this court of strangers, picking and prodding at his wounds as they stuck salt inside.

There was nothing left for him here. He did not care for the crown, which he had planned to give to Taehyung once he took it back. Taehyung, now mated to Lord Jeon’s son, who’d left Jimin and Seokjin both behind.

Taehyung did not need Seokjin, especially not anymore. The omega had not forgotten that.

He remembered Taehyung’s letter, which had mentioned Chanyeol’s offer. The majority of the kingdom already thought he had run off to Qing. Why not put some truth to that rumor?

Seokjin realized he was becoming very good at running away.

Namjoon knew something was wrong, could feel it in the coldness that wrapped around his body, the itch at the back of his neck.

Something clawed at him, raking its nails along the lining of his insides as it drew forth a kind of viciousness that Namjoon had yet to feel before. He felt the saliva gather in his mouth, teeth aching to tear into the soft, plush gland in Jin’s neck, to dig into his flesh and claim him as his own.

He’d make such a pretty mate. A strong, pretty mate, his inner alpha practically salivated at the thoughts. *Give us strong babes.*

If Namjoon claimed him, he couldn’t run away like he was doing right now, couldn’t hide from Namjoon’s gaze and avert his eyes upon passing each other in the hall. Namjoon hated the distance between them. He wanted nothing more than to gather Jin in his arms, to press kisses to his face as he rubbed the scent glands in his wrists, to sink himself into that tight, warm heat and lose himself.

Perhaps it would have been better if he'd never had a taste. Now that he had, he was addicted. Namjoon couldn't get the other omega out of his head, even as he avoided him day after after.

More time, Namjoon thought. *How much time are we talking about?*

A sort of dark possessiveness curled in his belly, wriggling like a snake at the idea of Jin leaving him behind, running away and pretending that what happened between them was nothing. Namjoon wouldn't allow it. Sure, he'd give the omega more time, but when Jin came back to him, he would ruin the pretty thing, fuck him good and hard enough that he screamed, walls moulded around Namjoon's cock so that he might never forget the shape of it.

But those were just thoughts, rather dark ones, and they were all Namjoon could think of.

The anger spread to his chest, lighting his lungs on fire, and he threw a fist out in frustration, catching it on the edge of his desk with a hiss. Hoseok shot him a look, raising an eyebrow.

"Is everything alright, Namjoon?" he asked, shuffling the papers in his hands.

"I'm fine," Namjoon growled, sounding very not fine.

They were trying to organize things for the coronation, to make sure enough food was prepared and the right decorations or artifacts were displayed. It was important that things be done right, that everyone of importance be invited, because if any mistakes were made, then Lord Jeon would have plenty to say about it. He and his minor imperialist lords, the ones who had hidden away in the countryside when the mad king was too mad, might even see it as reason to challenge his claim if things weren't done according to customs. Hoseok and Lord Woo had gathered as many court records and documents as they could, hoping to follow all of the proper steps.

Namjoon was just here so that he knew what was going on. That and he didn't really have anywhere else to be at this time, which was usually reserved for his meetings with Jin.

Hoseok blinked and gave a sort of a half-smile. He went back to shuffling his papers, then stopped. "Namjoon," he started. "How long has it been since you last had a rut?"

Namjoon's nose twitched and he felt himself tense. "Nearly a year," he admitted rather gruffly. "Why?"

"Just wondering," Hoseok shrugged his shoulders.

Alphas went into rut either yearly or twice a year, less than an omega's seasons. Sometimes an alpha's ruts wouldn't start until they'd started to court an omega, or the overwhelming urge to settle down and "sow their seed", for lack of a better term, eventually hit them.

Namjoon lifted a hand up, sniffing the scent gland on his wrist. "You think it's coming up?"

"I don't know, Namjoon. Do you think it's coming up?" Hoseok asked.

Namjoon narrowed his eyes. "How am I supposed to know?" he snapped, voice nearly a growl.

Hoseok flinched, but only barely. He looked at Namjoon and rose an eyebrow carefully, cocking his head to the side.

Namjoon deflated. "Right," he sighed. "It probably is, then."

Usually he was better at controlling his temper, at least when it came to anyone he cared about,

even if he was nearing rut. Things were tense now, however, as the threat of Lord Jeon began to loom over their heads, as the loss of Jeongguk and Jin hit him.

He thought of how inconvenient a rut would be amidst all of this. He only hoped it would come two weeks later at least, long after the coronation occurred. Ruts were always annoying, though probably not as annoying as a heat. Namjoon's own rut usually lasted only three days, and it was something he could handle on his own.

Except...Jin didn't know that. If Namjoon happened upon him one day, asked for his help with a rut and explained how terribly hard they were, perhaps he could persuade the omega to help him out. Namjoon might insist that he could go seek out another omega, but perhaps Jin's possessiveness would rise to rival his own, and the omega would agree.

After that, all it would take was an ill-placed bite, a lack of control due to the haze of his rut, and then he and Jin would be bonded for life.

Namjoon couldn't help but smile, hand rising to scratch at his neck, adjusting his scarf. Then he could tell Jin who he was properly, without fear of rejection, and they'd put whatever the omega was going through behind them.

A happily ever after, in Namjoon's own twisted way.

He will know anyway, Namjoon told himself. Once he sees me crowned king. Perhaps he'll be angry at me...but he's the one who avoided me.

Namjoon found he liked the thought of Jin's anger, of his fury and wrath, much better than he liked the other's cold silence.

Lord Jeon had insisted that Jeongguk and Taehyung attend the coronation. He'd said they would be proving to the Bangtan court their unity as a mated pair.

What a joke. Already, Jeongguk's bite mark was beginning to sour, indents still fresh and raw, refusing to heal. One of the specialists that his father summoned said it was because of a stressful environment, because his mate was suffering duress. Lord Jeon had rolled his eyes and decided the only way to fix it was to lock Jeongguk and Taehyung in shared quarters. The bond would cement itself if they just spent enough time together.

It hadn't gotten any better yet, and they'd been confined in close proximity for nearly a month. Taehyung was incorrigible, more childish and unpleasant than Jeongguk had thought he could be. He pouted when he didn't get his way and insisted that Jeongguk feed him when they took their meals together.

He'd become even worse when Jeongguk broke the news to him that they would be attending the coronation together.

"I refuse!" Taehyung spat. "I will not kneel before that second-rate, knock-off zombie! You can't make me!"

Jeongguk fixed him with a look. "Then say goodbye to your head. Oh, and mine as well, I suppose. We're partially bonded so perhaps I'll only partially die with you."

Taehyung narrowed his eyes, gave a huff and stormed off to the other room.

Jeongguk watched him leave and sank in one of the wooden chairs, feeling the air leave him in one

go. It was exhausting, dealing with Taehyung's temperamental moods. The specialist had said it was a side effect of their fractured bond, of Taehyung's unwillingness to mate. Jeongguk ran his fingers through his hair, surely mussing it. He'd heard stories of pairs in disarray, but usually it was an omega, particularly one claimed as a war prize. Not an alpha.

They'd been moved to the Jeon manor soon after the whole fiasco at the camp, under Lord Jeon's close watch and guard. Leaving was out of the question, and any contact with the outside world was nothing more than a dream. Not even Jeongguk could write. Not to Namjoon or Hoseok or Yoongi. It was the worst punishment his father could deal him.

Jeongguk's shoulders shook, and he leaned back in his chair, closing his eyes. He'd thought he was doing the right thing, but everything had gone so wrong. His father...had become a sort of monster that Jeongguk could never have imagined.

Lord Jeon's eyes were fixed on the throne, on power and control, and treating people as nothing more than pawns. Jeongguk settled a hand on his flat stomach and prayed that Taehyung's seed may never take. At least not until his father was exiled or exposed or even executed. Only then might they be safe.

But never happy. No, the possibility of that had been ruined for them. The only bride-price Lord Jeon would accept had been Kim Seokjin's life.

And Taehyung...Taehyung was a mess. A broken, unhappy, vengeful mess. He hated Jeongguk every other day, blaming him for their situation, and then the rest of his days were spent spewing out unpleasant things about Lord Jeon and Namjoon and Yoongi. All of them were snakes in Taehyung's eyes, and he hated each and every one of them.

"Even me?" Jeongguk had asked outright one night, voice choked full with emotion.

Taehyung paused, face almost paling. "No, no, no!" he declared, though his eyes said something else. It was instinct that told Taehyung to come forward, that urged him to wrap his omega in his arms and soothe Jeongguk's worries.

"I'm just sad," Taehyung murmured into Jeongguk's neck, pressing kisses there and acting as if the swelling along his bite mark did not exist.

Jeongguk pushed him away, tired of pretending. "So am I," he admitted, tears springing to his eyes.

He did not look at Taehyung for a week as he waged his own war of sorts, but that just made things worse. Eventually it came time for them to pack what little things they had and make their way to the capital. Taehyung had settled and went without fighting, which Jeongguk was grateful for. He did not have the energy to fight or plead in Taehyung's place any longer, not when he had had a month of nothing more than that.

They rode in the same gold, gilded carriage, which was under strict instruction to remain guarded heavily at all times. For the longest time neither of them spoke, didn't stare at each other either.

"I have not been back since the Uprising," Taehyung noted. He leaned his cheek against the wall of the carriage. Jeongguk thought it must be impossibly hard and not comfortable at all.

"You were there?" Jeongguk asked, furrowing his brow.

"For the aftermath," Taehyung admitted, and his eyes looked like they were far, far away. "I came back for my brother. My guard - Dowon - he'd heard that the rebels were coming for the capital. I knew something was wrong, that my brother was in danger."

He flexed his fingers and grinned. "Phoenix blood, you know?"

"So you helped hide him there?" Jeongguk frowned.

The smile fell off of Taehyung's face. "No," he said shortly. "That was all Seokjin's doing."

Jeongguk noticed that his knee was bouncing lightly, up and down, up and down.

"He wanted to hide in the palace, then?" Jeongguk asked, wanting to clarify things, since this was the first that Taehyung had spoken of what happened to him and his brother after the Uprising.

The bouncing increased. "I don't think he necessarily wanted to," Taehyung finally said. "It just...happened. He made it happen...in order to do what he thought needed to be done. That's what his letter to me said."

Jeongguk reached out, placed his hand on Taehyung's knee to steady it. He tried to assure his mate. "I'm sure my father doesn't want him dead. He's...more useful if he's alive."

Taehyung shook his head, looking rather sad. "I thought you admitted you didn't know your father as well as you thought?"

Jeongguk blinked. "I didn't know you were listening to me when I said that."

Jeongguk had been screaming it through their door, of course, the very first night they'd arrived at the manor, when Taehyung had shut himself up inside the bedroom, pissed off and refusing to come out so they could talk some things over.

"I'm sorry, Taehyung. So sorry!" Jeongguk had cried, face red and puffy, body shaking. "I guess...I guess I didn't know him as well as I thought!"

The memory was bad one, ending in Jeongguk falling asleep curled up between the hard marble floor and cold wooden door, yearning for his new mate to come sleep with him and maybe even make a nest. Jeongguk had tried to forget it.

Slowly, Jeongguk started to retract his hand from Taehyung's knee.

Taehyung stopped him, resting his larger hand on top of Jeongguk's own. "I've been cruel to you," he said softly. "I'm sorry. You deserve better."

Jeongguk could not stand his warm gaze, not after a month of nothing but ice. He looked away, yet turned his hand over and threaded his finger through Taehyung's, accepting that much at least.

"I do," he remarked. "Don't I?"

They did not talk for the rest of the ride.

Jeongguk was not allowed to see Namjoon beforehand. The alpha was busy with preparations for the ceremony, and so when Jeongguk and his mate settled in his own rooms in the Jeon wing of the palace, it was only Hoseok that greeted him. Yoongi had yet to arrive as well.

Hoseok wrapped him in a hug, squeezing so tight that Jeongguk thought his bones might break. Jeongguk laughed and felt as if ten thousand worries had been taken off of him just at the sight of the man.

"You look rather well for not seeing your fiance in months," Jeongguk remarked.

Hoseok laughed. “He’d be angry if I didn’t. Probably would run off for another few months just to prove a point about how I need to take care of myself.”

Jeongguk’s eyes suddenly became watery. He didn’t really even understand why. “Yoongi,” he began quietly. “When will he get here?”

Hoseok shook his head, frowning a little. “Probably not until later. He might not even make to the coronation.”

Jeongguk stilled. “What do you mean? Why wouldn’t he be here?”

Hoseok sighed. “He’s tied up with things back at the estate. He couldn’t leave until late yesterday morning.”

Jeongguk found his hands fisting in Hoseok’s shirt, and he trembled a little. The weight of the secret crept up on him. He had to tell Yoongi that Lord Jeon knew, had to prepare the other omega for the fallout that would come. “I need to speak with him...it’s about - “

“Dear,” his mate called from the doorway, leaned against it in a casual, yet assessing sort of pose. “You didn’t tell me we had company.”

“Taehyung,” Jeongguk looked from Hoseok to his alpha. “This is Hoseok. You may know him as General Jung. We fought together many times on the battlefield.”

His alpha narrowed his eyes.

“Funny. His prowess on the battlefield wasn’t really put to use when it came to overthrowing my father, was it?” Taehyung said dryly. “No, you all decided to use poison to do the deed. How...cowardly.”

Hoseok stiffened, and his jaw clenched. The air became thick with aggression, the hostile energy from both alphas leaking out into the room. It made a part of Jeongguk want to curl in on himself, to hide behind Taehyung and maybe start to cry just so that they might stop.

But he didn’t.

Hoseok gave a mean smile and said, “Ah, so this is the infamous bastard prince, who ran from his father’s madness, who fled from our army and has been living in hiding for the past how many months? I think it’s interesting you think you have the right to label me a coward.”

“I did what I did to protect my brother,” Taehyung hissed. “I followed his wishes, his orders, because Seokjin was my king in all but name.”

“Hoseok,” Jeongguk murmured in warning. “That’s enough.”

It was nice that someone was standing up for him for once, and yet he knew that Hoseok was pressing too many buttons here, that he did not quite understand how unwilling Taehyung was in this whole arrangement.

But Hoseok was not done.

“Ah, and did Seokjin want you to mate sweet, little Jeongguk here? One of your enemies, a pillar of the Bangtan Four?”

Taehyung gritted his teeth, and the doorframe groaned in protest under his punishing grip.

“I didn’t want to mate him,” he growled.

Jeongguk flinched and bit his lip. The truth of that statement hurt him, did wonders as it bashed his self-esteem to smithereens. He knew from the start Taehyung may have wanted to fuck him, but did not want to spend a lifetime with him, and yet still it hurt to hear that.

Hoseok puffed out his chest, cocked an eyebrow and asked, “So you didn’t force Jeongguk into mating you?”

“Taehyung’s not the bad guy here, Hoseok,” Jeongguk pleaded softly. He took a deep breath.

“It’s a long story, but if anyone forced anyone into anything, then it was me. I willingly went into that tent where they had him chained up and drugged. I made sure he bit me when we fucked. But I did it...because I thought I was saving his life. I knew that my cousin Jieun would be no friend to Taehyung, that she’d do whatever my father told her. She was close to her heat, too, so there’s no way she wouldn’t conceive. I...wasn’t sure if my father would keep Taehyung alive once he had the heir he wanted.”

He felt Taehyung’s gaze on him, roving over Jeongguk’s body, and he saw Hoseok’s face pale at the revelation. The general screwed his face up in disgust, looking like he might throw up.

“Namjoon will kill your father,” Hoseok shook his head. He reached out, grabbing Jeongguk by the shoulder. “And honestly, I think I’d help. What does he think he’s doing?”

“Gaining power,” Jeongguk murmured. “I don’t know him any longer. Or perhaps...I never knew him at all.”

Hoseok let out a long sigh and let go. “I’ll tell Namjoon he shouldn’t be mad at the bastard then,” he nodded to Taehyung. “This is all your father’s doing.”

“Please. And, let him know my father has discovered where Prince Seokjin is hiding,” Jeongguk rubbed at his nose, ignored the near growl that came from Taehyung.

Hoseok appeared a little shocked, as if he hadn’t expected that, but he left without another word.

Once the other alpha was gone, Taehyung turned on Jeongguk, furious. “Why did you tell General Jung that your father knew?”

“He will learn it anyways, probably from my father himself,” Jeongguk replied wearily, tired of Taehyung’s anger already. “It was best that I prepare him so that he knows what to expect, so my father can’t catch him off guard.”

He waved Taehyung off. “I need to get ready for the ceremony and say hello to my mother. Give me the courtesy of privacy at least.”

Taehyung huffed but agreed, stomping off into the other rooms

There was no need for Jeongguk to seek his mother out. While he was in the midst of changing, she came to his quarters

“Jeongguk, oh my baby!” she cried, throwing her arms around him.

“Hello, Mother,” he greeted, less enthusiastic. Jeongguk was still in his smallclothes, a thin slip between him and his mother.

Lady Jeon held him at arm's length and looked him over. "Oh, son," she sighed. "You look...you look..."

"Like an omega," Jeongguk finished. "A proper omega. Right?"

She sighed and her eyes became wet. "Yes! You even have makeup on! Oh my goodness! Have Weiyoungh's lessons finally proven useful?"

"I suppose," Jeongguk lied. "It's just...I'm mated now. I should start acting like a proper omega, yes?"

His mother gave a firm nod. "Indeed! I'm so glad you finally saw sense!"

Her praise and joy made Jeongguk feel sick, stomach so upset that he wanted to barf. "Come, Mother. Help me with my clothes?"

Lady Jeon sniffled. "Of course! Oh, I've always wanted to help you dress in these pretty things."

Jeongguk slid on the silky golden underskirt of his hanbok and his mother tied the side of the top, a sheer white fabric. She ran her hands over the material, making a happy noise in the back of her throat. "You look beautiful, Jeongguk. Here, look at me."

She grabbed him by the chin, moving his face from side to side, and the other hand traced the nape of his neck, playing with the tufts of hair there. "You should grow your hair out," she instructed. "You'll look even better."

"Of course, Mother," Jeongguk droned. He had no plans of doing that.

His mother looked at his desk, inspecting the different sorts of jewelry and ornaments that rested there. "Where did you get so many of these?"

"Father gave them to me. A wedding present, he said."

Lady Jeon's lips twisted into a frown, and she set one of the golden necklaces down rather distastefully. "Let's not speak of that, ok? I'm rather upset he married you off without even summoning me there. I had the most splendid gown picked up, and I'd even hired Weiyoungh to do your hair! Ugh, all of those plans gone to waste!"

"Yes, how terrible," Jeongguk agreed.

If his mother noticed the dullness of his voice, the lack of light in his eyes, she didn't say a word about it. She just hummed as she continued to pick through the jewelry. Eventually she gasped and held one up for Jeongguk to see.

"How perfect! A golden lily!" she exclaimed. Lady Jeon gestured for him to turn around. "Here, let me put it in for you."

Jeongguk shook his head furiously, somehow feeling even worse than before. "No, please. I'd rather not wear that."

The hairpin was reminder of his brief time with Taehyung, who he'd fallen in love with, and Jeongguk knew Taehyung would not be pleased to see it on him.

"I insist!" Lady Jeon scoffed. She turned him around, clicking her tongue. "It's too beautiful not to wear, especially for something like this. Some coronations only come once a lifetime, you know!"

The next time you'll get to see one will be when you're old and grey and you won't look nearly as good as you do now. Trust me! Oh, just look at you!"

Jeongguk turned to see how it looked. The hairpin was placed on the left side of his head, tucking a few tufts of hair into place. He wanted to throw up, felt like his stomach might fall out of his body. He took a deep breath.

"I need to take a walk before the ceremony. Out in the courtyard. I can't...I can't breathe," he explained, tugging at the collar of his hanbok.

The omega made to move, to leave, but his mother latched her hand onto his wrist in an iron-tight hold.

"You can't," she said too quickly. "You can't go out there!"

Jeongguk stilled. "Why not?"

His mother's bottom lip trembled. "Your father...is doing some interrogation. On a few of the palace servants. It would just upset you if you saw."

Jeongguk jerked his hand away. "I've handled the guts and gore of a battlefield, Mother," he reminded her coldly. "I think I can handle a few beatings."

His mother straightened her shoulders and fixed him with a disbelieving glare.

"Don't say I didn't warn you," Lady Jeon called after him. "You're more tenderhearted than you think. All omegas are."

It was after the ceremony that Lord Jeon cornered Namjoon. "My king," he bowed. "I'm afraid I have some troubling news to share with you."

"What is it?" Namjoon asked, narrowing his eyes, already in a bad mood.

Lord Jeon smiled. "Perhaps we should go somewhere private, yes? Just us and a few others."

Namjoon nodded his head. "Meet me in my study, then you can tell me all that you know."

Inside he was seething. He already knew what Lord Jeon had planned to say, having been warned by Hoseok. Right now he wanted to seek out Jin, to try and make things right between them, but he couldn't because of Lord Jeon. Though Namjoon knew of Lord Jeon's intentions it didn't make it any easier for him to put on a pleasant facade whenever Lord Jeon came to his study, Min Duran, Hyewon, Lord Jung and some other figure in tow.

"I thought I should bring representatives of each house, my king," Lord Jeon reasoned. "And I have a witness as well."

Namjoon shifted in his seat, uncomfortable. He waved his hand. "Out with it then. What is this urgent matter you need to speak with me about?"

"It's Prince Seokjin, Your Grace. Taehyung was willing to give up his location," Lord Jeon informed him.

"And we couldn't talk about this at a later date? Instead of right after my coronation?" Namjoon's nostrils flared.

"I would have," Lord Jeon sighed. "It's just that this is a rather pressing issue. Prince Seokjin is here. In this palace. Or at least he was."

There was a ringing in Namjoon's ears, an ear-splitting sound. He stood frozen, barely dared even to breathe. Several things started to make sense all at once, the holes and gaps in Namjoon's reasoning suddenly filled. But he would not trust his mind for something like this.

He had to place his hand on his desk to steady himself. "What do you mean?"

"He's been here, right under our noses all of this time," Lord Jeon replied.

Namjoon swallowed the lump in his throat and fiddled with his gloves. He opened his mouth to say something, anything, but there was a knock at the door.

"Prince Seokjin seeks an audience, Your Grace," Lord Woo called through the wooden door.

Namjoon closed his eyes. He felt the weight of everything weigh down on him, nearly crushing his lungs, and it felt so very much like dying.

"Come in," the alpha allowed, though he wanted nothing more than to refuse.

When Namjoon opened his eyes, he came face to face with Jin, and his world fell apart.

Seokjin was set to leave the day before Namjoon's coronation. That very morning, Ru offered him tea.

She set it on the table across from him, nudging it forward indiscreetly. Seokjin stared at it for a moment, hand circling around the clay cup. Warmth spread to his fingers, and he sniffed, immediately recognizing what sort of tea she'd poured for him. Seokjin glanced up at her.

"Thank you. You really didn't have to - "

Ru interrupted him. "It was the least I could do, Jin. After what you did for me, this is nothing," she insisted.

Seokjin relented, then looked back down to the tea. He blew on it, smoke innocently curling up and away. The notion came to him, of how likely it might be he'd need this tea, of whether he wanted something like this or not. Things were different for him than they had been for Ru. Eventually, he made the decision to push the tea back across the table with a shake of his head.

"Thank you, Ru," he repeated, "but there's no need. Honestly."

She raised her eyebrows, frowning a little. "You're sure?"

At Seokjin's firm nod, she relented and took the tea away. "I wish you didn't have to go," she admitted. "I wish we could just get rid of Captain Joon."

Seokjin winced. "It's a little more complicated than just Joon."

Ru cocked her head to the side. "How so?"

Seokjin humored her. "What would you say, if I told you I was the Crown Prince?"

The other omega cackled, throwing her head back to laugh. "I think I'd do just this," she huffed. "Laugh!"

Seokjin couldn't help but smile. It would be rather funny, wouldn't it? For a scarred, pathetic omega from the kitchens to be saying something like that. Seokjin caught sight of himself in the mirror that sat on Jimin's dresser and thought that he looked very pitiful indeed.

His eyes were dull, lips cracked and face gaunt. What sort of beauty had Joon seen in him? He wondered this, then realized that it hadn't been beauty at all.

Just a ruse, a clever attempt to play the games the silly Crown Prince had set in motion. Why else would Namjoon have given him the time of day?

There was strength in blood, desire that thrummed through it. The demon in Seokjin's head told him that it was because their dirty blood sang to each other, remembered the fragile bond they once had and wept, eager to renew it. The Kims had been intermarrying each other for years. Their engagement, to Seokjin's knowledge, was the furthest related a matched pair had ever been.

Even if Namjoon didn't know, he would be angry if he found out, disappointed that the brave, cunning omega he'd wasted his time on had actually been the weak, scared boy who stood by and watched him burn.

Seokjin hoped he might never have to see his face when he found out. Though he did not know it yet, this wish, like many of his others, would go ignored by the gods.

Leah gave him a small sack of coins before he left, a little gift from all five omegas to him. "It's not much," she admitted, "but we wanted to do something for you."

Seokjin could barely take it from her, his hands shook so much. "Thank you," he muttered, embarrassed and yet pleased.

Suran caught him before she left as well, with a knapsack of food in hand. "Bread and jerky. I snuck it from the kitchens."

"You didn't have to - " Seokjin started.

Suran shook her head and pulled him in for a hug. It was the first time she had ever embraced him. There were tears in her eyes. "If you plan to leave by ship to Qing, then go to Wei Harbor. My brother works there. Tell him his little sister Suran Snoozy sent you there. He'll know you're a friend of mine and get you on any ship you need."

Her tears wetted his shirt, soaking the thick cloth. Seokjin blinked back a few of his own. "I won't forget you, Suran," he promised. "I don't think I could if I tried."

Minwoo and the other stableboy readied a horse for him. "We don't know you all that well," Minwoo said shyly, looking down at the ground. "But you helped Ru when she was hurt. We wanted to thank you for that."

Seokjin took the reins with a nod of his head, murmuring his thanks. He looked up at the sloping roofs of the palace, at the white flakes that began to whirl in the air. He was going to leave the life he had built for himself behind. He would have to kill Park Jin. He'd instructed Jimin on what to do, on the letter that he would have sent as soon as he was safe and sound, perhaps with a certain bloodied jade comb as proof of his death.

A part of him wanted to immortalize the role he'd created, the omega named Park Jin that Captain Joon had entertained, but he did not want the alpha to seek him out still. To do that, he needed to die. It was the only logical answer.

Jimin tried to talk him out of leaving, saying it was too dangerous, that he would be killed if he left. Seokjin had merely smiled at him, assuring him that he knew all sorts of ways to get out of this palace. And he did. This was his birthplace and the place that he had grown. For the longest time, he'd thought it would be his grave. Seokjin's hands tightened on the reins. He no longer wanted that anymore, to live and die within these blood stained walls.

Seokjin left at supper, when a few of the guards changed their shifts in order for those on duties to eat their meals. It was easy to slip past them, bundled in the cloak that Jimin had gifted him before he left, as he guided his horse onward.

The snow flurried, but did not accumulate, melting as soon as it touched the ground. Seokjin was grateful for that. He did not want to be stuck in a snowstorm, though the astrologist had said this would be the last time it snowed.

Seokjin passed through the capital streets, which still remained relatively bare. No one cared to stand outside in the cold, especially this late at night. He passed by Yerin's brothel and entertained the thought of stopping by, but he perished the thought. If he saw Yerin, he might cut her throat. She had broken her promise to protect Taehyung, instead allowing that idiot to marry some Bangtan rebel. Seokjin could not forgive such an oversight.

He wondered, very briefly, if Yerin had ever given Taehyung the letter Jimin wrote. But no - she wouldn't have. Not if what Jimin said was true and she hated him that much, if she had bullied Jimin into giving up his one shot at happiness.

Seokjin still did not understand Yerin or her motives, and he found he did not want to either. Something in his memories told him it would be a bad idea if he found out, and the demon whispered things about a sullied womb and curses, tracing its claws along Seokjin's belly.

He stayed the night at an inn on the outskirts of the capital, a shoddy little place that took his coin without question. He was almost out of the capital, and he would have made it out, too, if it hadn't been for the rumors he heard.

Rumors traveled fast, faster still when they involved public, infamous figures. When he went down for breakfast in the morning, he heard a group of men yelling amongst themselves, shaking their heads. Seokjin listened to them as he found a seat at a table not too far away, curious as to what they were excited about.

"Rounded up all of the omegas!"

"How many of them?"

"Only a few, I think!"

"No, no, it was a hundred! As many omegas as the palace employed, so it had to be a lot!"

Seokjin looked back at them, mouth gaping as soon as the words "palace" and "omegas" used in the same sentence. Before he really knew what he was doing, he'd risen from his seat and was walking over to approach the men cautiously.

"Excuse me!" he called. "Omegas in the palace? What are you talking about?"

The group was all too eager to share what they knew, going over what they had heard from the baker who heard it from the shoe maker who heard it from one of the water maidens that worked in the palace.

Some details were too ridiculous and outlandish that Seokjin knew they had to be false. The king had been crowned this morning, a long lost Kim cousin known as Kim Namjoon, but after the coronation ceremony and festivities, the omegas in the palace were rounded up.

“Whatever for,” Seokjin breathed, a hand to his chest while the other braced himself on the table.

One of the men shrugged his shoulders. “They’ve been charged with treason. I’ve heard they were harboring the Crown Prince somehow.”

“The old Crown Prince you mean,” one man corrected. “I mean, he wouldn’t be the Crown Prince anymore, would he?”

“Beats me,” his friend said. “I don’t know how any of those things work.”

“Thank you,” Seokjin said, voice faint. It seemed as if he were somewhere else, witnessing one of those out-of-body experiences. He moved without really thinking, leaving the group of men behind, and went to recover his horse from the stables.

He pressed his hands along the old, used saddle he’d gathered from the shed back at the palace, running his fingertips across the torn edge where he had ripped the royal phoenix insignia off. He leaned his head against the chest of the horse, felt it breath in and out.

Treason.

Who had told?

Had it been Namjoon, who revealed the farce as soon as he’d discovered Seokjin missing?

No. Something about that didn’t sit right with Seokjin. It wasn’t Namjoon who told. It couldn’t be Jimin either, as he was an omega working in the palace, and would have been implicated as well.

Then who?

Taehyung, the demon whispered. The name crossed his mind, but he barely paid it any mind. That sort of betrayal...it would be unforgivable. Unfathomable. Impossible.

Someone else then. But why were the omegas to be blamed? Who knew of their involvement?

Their faces appeared in front of him, one right after the other.

Jimin, Ru, Leah, even Minwoo and the other boy he still didn’t know the name of.

Treason.

His father’s laugh and the guards brought in that girl, her face a mess. He thought of Jimin and Ru crying, of Leah’s head struck from her body, of any of them being torn apart by horses or burned alive.

No, Seokjin convinced himself, opening his eyes so that he might not see those terrible visions. *There will be a trial. Joon will be fair, as he always tries to be.*

But this concerns you, the voice argued. *If he didn’t know, and finds out...Once he learns you lied to him, pretended to be something you were not, and played him like a fool...he will be seething, livid in his rage. And an angry Kim is a Kim no one wants to come face to face with.*

Seokjin trembled, turned and rested his head against the side of the horse. He couldn’t breathe

properly, felt as if his chest would cave in. His heart was beating too fast, and there was pain behind his eyelids, thrumming in tandem.

Could he make it there in time, if he rushed, if he ignored the precautions that he'd taken as he snuck out of the palace? Could he reason with Namjoon, perhaps plead for mercy?

If they are already dead then...then I will...

Seokjin shut his eyes and did not dare even think it.

Instead the omega took a deep breath and climbed on top of the horse, resolved to return to the very place he had run from.

Seokjin must have looked like a sight for sore eyes. His shoes and the bottom of his hanbok were muddied, stained with dirty slush from the melting snow. His black hair mussed, cheeks flushed and chafed from the wind. He called to the guard standing watch along the wall.

“Open the gates,” he commanded, summoning the voice from deep inside he had not used in a long time.

The guard laughed. “And why should I let a poor beggar like you in?”

Seokjin took a deep breath and counted to ten in his head. He opened his mouth, ready to speak, but someone spoke his words for him.

“Tell the king that Kim Seokjin has come for an audience,” a smooth voice replied from behind him.

Seokjin froze, turning to look. There was a carriage behind him, a whole entourage of horses and carts and wagons. Black and silver lined the carriage and the Bangtan flags flew beside it. Stepping out of the carriage was Seokjin's former friend and foe. He was dressed in black, as per usual, and the man turned back to hold out his hand so another figure, this one hooded, could exit the carriage as well.

The guard at the wall gawked. “But my lord - “

“If anyone asks, you will say Lord Min insisted,” Min Yoongi retorted, rolling his eyes. “After all, I can't leave a friend out in the cold like this, can I?”

Seokjin couldn't help it. He threw his head back and laughed.

The gates to the palace opened, more slowly than Seokjin would have liked. The omegas stared at each other. Eventually, Seokjin gave a nod. “I'll meet you inside, Lord Min,” he promised.

“Of course, Prince Seokjin,” Yoongi ducked his head.

The servant rode the horse passed the palace gates, and Prince Seokjin came home.

Word spread like wildfire.

The Crown Prince has arrived.

Prince Seokjin is here, right now.

But the coronation is already over?

What does he want?

The whispers followed Seokjin as he stopped in front of the palace. He'd passed an executioner's block on his way through the courtyard entrance, and the smell of blood was crisp in the air, along with the scent of an omega's fright. The grief did not hit him yet, he would not allow it to. There was no assurance, just a few clues. Seokjin would not believe his friends were dead until he saw their bodies, or what was left of them at least.

So many servants gawked at him as he made his way into the palace, but once he was inside no one paid him any mind really. He didn't really quite know where he was going. To find his friends? To confront Namjoon? Seokjin had no clear plan for the first time in his life.

He stopped in front of the doors of the dining hall. Seokjin shut his eyes, heard the screams and cries and whimpers. He felt Lord Sam's blood on his hands, so soaked in it that the stuff was buried beneath his fingernails, and he saw Taehyung standing over Adviser Paek, pushing the Mun family sword into the old beta's guts.

He stood there for perhaps nearly an hour, just staring at the hall, reminiscing the horrors he had endured in that place. He'd been there as a servant, of course, but now he came as a prince again, which opened up his wounds all over again, raw and bleeding. A few servants passed back and forth, giving him questioning looks, but no one really thought anything. Some of them probably recognized him as the kitchen servant Jin and wondered why he was just standing there, but he wasn't too out of place in their eyes. He heard a few servants whisper things about the Crown Prince, but they did not pay attention to him.

The whole truth was not out to everyone at least.

Seokjin tore his gaze from the doors of the dining hall and looked upon the hallways, taking in the decorations for the first time, the ribbons, banners, and colorful things that had been arranged for the coronation ceremony this morning.

Yet there were no nobles passing through, no music or joy within this section of the palace. Seokjin wondered what had happened, pressing a hand to his heart to perhaps calm it, and the phoenix on his back shrieked in warning, nearly growing claws as it felt like his skin was tearing.

Lord Woo happened upon him.

The elderly lord gasped when he saw Seokjin standing there, and he pressed a hand to his chest, wheezing. "Gods, it's you!"

Seokjin turned to the old man and smiled. "Lord Woo," he greeted, perfect picture of serenity. "Would you be so kind as to call me an audience with the king? I'm afraid that there are things the two of us have to discuss."

"Guards!" Lord Woo called, summoning two of the men who stood watch down the hall. "Help me escort Prince Seokjin to the king's study."

Seokjin let each of them take one of his arms, knowing it would do him no good to protest and fight, and they did as Lord Woo had ordered, guiding him in the familiar direction of Namjoon's study.

"You couldn't have had more perfect timing," Lord Woo muttered, leading the way. "Lord Jeon was just telling Namjoon all about your little ploy."

"Lord Jeon?" Seokjin repeated. His heart nearly stopped in his chest. He wanted to ask, to think, but they came to a stop in front of the doors to the study, and suddenly a thousand different thoughts swept over those other thousand thoughts.

He would be seeing Joon again. Something in him yearned for the other's attention, just as much as another part of him was terrified at seeing him like this. The guards let go of his arms, and Seokjin's mouth felt ridiculously dry. Seokjin chided himself and his hesitation.

"Prince Seokjin seeks an audience, Your Grace," Lord Woo called.

A pause and then -

"Come in," Joon allowed.

A crowd awaited him, nothing like what Seokjin had imagined this reunion to be. He'd hoped for something more private - perhaps a death at Joon's hands alone - not to be gutted like an animal before all of these spectators.

There were a couple gasps as they saw who it was that dared interrupt their meeting. Lord Woo shuffled passed Seokjin and ducked his head to the figure at the forefront of the room, then moved over to stand beside his granddaughter Hyewon.

"Ah, the man of the hour!" Lord Jeon greeted, looking pleasantly surprised. "Why, I couldn't have timed this better myself!"

Seokjin ignored him. He had eyes for no one but Namjoon.

"Kim Namjoon," Seokjin addressed the king, holding his gaze as he curtsied, though it was a little difficult with the two guards holding onto his arms.

The alpha looked like he had seen a ghost, as if that ghost had shoved a knife inside of his heart and twisted while they were at it. Seokjin thought he must be a very good actor to appear that distressed. Namjoon probably thought it was funny, that the little omega from the kitchens he had fucked turned out to be the prince whose crown he'd stolen.

That or he was disgusted.

"Jin," he said, for what was perhaps the last time. "There's no way. Is this some kind of joke?"

But no one was laughing. Shouldn't that have been answer enough? Seokjin glanced around, taking note of the spectators. Lord Jung, the general's father, stood next to Lord Woo, who had settled next to his granddaughter Hyewon. Min Duran sat on the sofa, looking perhaps a little too pleased with the situation, and Lord Jeon sat across from her. He wondered where Jeon's sons were, why Yoongi and General Jung were not in attendance. There was a hooded figure in the corner of the room behind him, but Seokjin had no time to speculate upon which Bangtan rebel it was.

"I'm afraid it is very real, Your Grace," Lord Jeon replied, with a heavy, regretful sigh. "This omega has been deceiving you, been deceiving all of us!"

"No," Namjoon shook his head. "I refuse to believe it. That's not Seokjin, I would...I would know if it were."

Seokjin kept his mouth shut, neither accepting nor denying the truth that had been laid bare in Namjoon's quarters. He knew a power play when he saw one, but the goal of this eluded him. Would it end in his execution? If so, why had they brought him here?

Min Duran brought her handkerchief to her mouth, making a noise in the back of her throat. “I did always say he was too haughty for his own good. He had this sort of self-importance that only aristocrats have. But who knew, the son of the mad king?”

“Do you have anything to say for yourself?” Namjoon asked, a little desperate, as if he were pleading.

Seokjin gritted his teeth, heard Min Duran proclaim, “Silence is admission to guilt, little omega. Surely you understand that much at least?”

Seokjin kept his mouth shut, reigned his fury back into his chest. He’d spit it out when the right time and place presented themselves, but not here, tucked away in a room surrounded by his enemies, held up by guards who threatened to place a knife to his throat.

Namjoon shook his head, breaking away from Seokjin’s gaze. He looked to Lord Jeon.

“What proof do you have, Lord Jeon?” he asked. “You say this is Prince Seokjin, but I have nothing more than your words to back your claim.”

Lord Jeon grinned, as if he had been waiting for Namjoon to ask that question. “Oh, I have plenty of proof, my king.”

He gestured to Seokjin and remarked, rather slyly, “Didn’t the Crown Prince have the mark of the phoenix upon his back? Why don’t we check and see?”

“No!” Seokjin refused sharply, the first thing that he had said other than Namjoon’s name. His hands began to shake, panicking as he thought of being bared in front of these people, his precious mark exposed for all to see.

“Oh?” Lord Jeon raised his eyebrows. “And why ever not?”

Seokjin’s jaw clenched, and he tried to reign himself in. “An omega’s modesty should never be used as a tool, Lord Jeon. I’m afraid you would be compromising my virtue.”

“It seems like you have something to hide,” Lord Jung pointed out. “It’s not like we’re forcing you to remove all your clothing. We just need to see your back.”

“It’s the principle of the matter!” Seokjin snapped.

“Enough,” Namjoon commanded. He looked at Seokjin, shut his eyes and took a deep breath. Seokjin, the fool that he was, thought he might dismiss the others. He did not. Slowly, Namjoon raised a hand and gestured to the guards.

They began to move, turning him around, hands suddenly not on his arms, but on his back, grabbing at the material.

The panic set in fully then, and Seokjin nearly lost his mind. He thought of his father’s banquet, and Lord Sam who had tried to rip his clothes off of his body in front of the entire hall. His inner omega whined, terrified and helpless, and those feelings stained Seokjin’s own heart.

He was begging before he even knew it.

“No, Namjoon, please, please, please! Don’t let them see, don’t show them! You mustn’t!” Seokjin struggled, tugging his arms this way and that, trying to break the guards’ hold on him. “Please, Namjoon! You can’t!”

His eyes felt hot, and a current of shame washed over him, this time at the thought that he may cry in front of all of these people. He looked over his shoulder, but Namjoon refused to even look at him, perhaps he even pretended not to hear.

It must have been a pathetic sight. The omega who struggled and pleaded for an alpha to have mercy as his men were set upon him. Seokjin fought the entire time, but he was weak. His grief these past few weeks had drained him, and he was an omega now, a fully presented one. It made sense that he could not fight very well.

“Namjoon!” he cried one final time. His chest and lungs were full of something dark and awful, weighing down on his entire body. He felt he might collapse.

The back of his dress shirt made a loud, ripping sound, and Seokjin did just that, collapsed, cold air hitting his back. The guards let go of him as he fell forward. His knees ached as they hit the marble floor, surely starting to bruise, and he slowly looked up. Seokjin brought a hand to his chest, trying to hold his clothing up so that he might not face even more disgrace.

The panic that had settled in so suddenly now seeped out of him, piece by piece, rattling his bones as it left him. He thought he could hear his phoenix screeching, an agonizing, sorrowful sound as the onlookers began to murmur amongst themselves.

Though it was only the back of him that was bared, he felt as if he were naked. He had never been so bare in front of a crowd before, and he felt all of the eyes on him burn, stinging.

The tears on his cheeks felt cold now. Everything had been hollowed out in that instant, scooped out of him and paraded for all to see. His identity, his birthright, his sorrowful nature. All of it gone, nothing left.

Seokjin thought to meet the king’s gaze, wondered just what sort of expression was there on his face, but then he decided he didn’t much care and turned his head away.

He is a kind man. A loving man. Surely, he would not bring us dishonor if...

Seokjin had allowed himself to be tricked, had misread this alpha’s nature so greatly that it cost him everything he had. How could he have ever thought Kim Namjoon was kind, when he’d shamed him here today?

“Are you satisfied, Your Grace?” Lord Jeon murmured.

Namjoon did not answer, though his gaze was stuck to Seokjin’s back. “Is that all?”

“Far from it, my king,” Min Duran murmured. She snapped her fingers, and the hooded figure that had kept to the corner came forward, stopping in front of Seokjin’s prone form.

Seokjin’s nose twitched, catching a hint of something so nostalgic it burned his nostrils.

No, he thought. It can’t be!

But of course it was. He knew this woman. Though he hadn’t seen her in months, he recognized her instantly.

Slowly, the figure lowered her hood and revealed her visage to Seokjin and the Bangtan nobles gathered there.

“Hello, Crown Prince Seokjin,” the woman greeted, giving him a weary smile. “It’s been quite

some time, yes?"

Chapter End Notes

who is the woman that knows Seokjin?

what do you think the name of the next arc will be?

feel free to leave a comment with any thoughts, that or hit me up on [twitter](#) or [curiouscat](#)

as always thank you so much for reading and i hope you enjoyed! hopefully i will be able to get 2-4 more chapters out before i go back to college in january :) love you all
xoxo

Lady Hae's Truth

Chapter Summary

Seokjin's identity is confirmed by Lady Hae, who reveals the extent of the Bangtan rebels' plans for him.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Lady Hae,” Seokjin murmured. “What are you doing here?”

Lady Hae did not answer him, merely looked away as she addressed the nobles gathered. “This is the Crown Prince as I know him. Though I have to say he’s gained a scar or two and smells much sweeter.”

Seokjin shivered, closing his eyes so that he might not have to see her face. As he did so, suddenly there was something warm and heavy gracing his shoulders. He opened his eyes and saw that Lady Hae had taken her cloak off and fastened it around his shoulders, covering his back.

He wanted to cry at her kindness.

“Well, my king! There you have it! A confirmation from one of the old king’s court ladies!” Lord Jeon crowed.

Namjoon frowned. “You are Lady Hae, then? Why were you not killed in the Uprising?”

Lady Hae bowed, ducking her head. “The king sent me away, Your Grace. I was being punished for gossiping about the Bangtan rebels. At first, I was angry. Court life is so glamorous compared to the dull scenes of the countryside. Yet when word reached me of what had happened at the palace, I was grateful I had not perished with the rest.”

Seokjin remembered her screaming, her caterwauling as she was dragged away from the palace by the guards. She was a spoiled girl who liked fancy things and her dramatics. Time away from court life would have been torture.

Seokjin himself had gotten her into trouble so that he might draw his father’s ire towards Lord Hae and lose him another supporter. He had not ever really hated her. She was amusing to him, all of her ploys so see-through and childish, and Seokjin had not paid her much mind since the Uprising.

Yet now she seemed...different. More refined and mature, as if those ten months away from the palace had equated to ten years.

“And who will vouch for you? That you are truly Lady Hae and not some peasant paid to play the role?” Lord Jung asked gruffly, crossing his arms over his chest.

Lady Hae looked to him and smiled pleasantly. “Why, you can ask your future son-in-law for that! He lived in the palace and saw me nearly weekly when I was there. Lord Min’s word will protect me and my own.”

The nobles gathered were silent, some of them grumbling amongst each other and shooting glances this way and that. Meanwhile Lady Hae knelt down and wrapped an arm around Seokjin's shaking frame.

"You must do as they say," she murmured, the corner of her mouth barely moving, though it looked like she hadn't spoken at all. She turned him around, helping him move to face his judge and jury.

Lady Hae cleared her throat and addressed Namjoon. "What will be done with the Crown Prince?"

Min Duran spoke up before Namjoon could even get a word in. "He will be thrown in the dungeons, of course!" she scoffed. "He's no Crown Prince anymore. No, this one's little more than a beggar now."

Lord Woo stroked his beard. "If a Qing emperor is overthrown, then most of the time they execute them and all of their progeny. So that no claimants to the throne may one day rise and challenge them."

They broke out into whispers amongst themselves before suddenly -

"Enough!" Namjoon snarled.

The rest of the room flinched, but Seokjin found himself suddenly calm. He looked up, staring at the alpha, face expressionless. It was Namjoon who was shaking, a tremor rolling through his body, face red and eyes so vividly dark.

"There will be nothing of the sort," he spat. "Leave us. All of you. I must speak with Seokjin alone."

Lord Woo gasped and began to protest, with Lord Jung chiming in. Hyewon put a hand to her chest and looked like she might faint. Lord Jeon was suspiciously silent.

Min Duran scoffed. "And leave you alone with him? As soon as we leave, he might wrap his hands around your neck and kill you."

"Shut up!" Namjoon scowled. "Are you saying that I'm not strong, that I can't fend for myself?"

He shook his head. "I've had enough of all your excuses, of your clever ideas. All of you, leave me now unless you want to be rotting in a cell next to him!"

They scurried off slowly, sending looks behind them before they went, glares at Seokjin and worried glances at Namjoon. Seokjin had never thought he could hate the Bangtan rebels more than he already did. One by one, they left, until only Lady Hae remained.

"And what of Seokjin's safety, Your Grace?" the omega asked, her voice a soothing murmur. "He is an omega, a gentle thing, surely you will not-"

"I know what he is!" Namjoon sneered. "Now leave, Lady Hae! I'm sure Lord Jeon will pay whatever he promised for bringing you here today."

Lady Hae tensed, yet rose, giving a subtle bow as she did. "Be careful, Seokjin," she murmured before she left.

Seokjin wanted to scoff. He didn't need her of all people to tell him that. The door slid shut and suddenly it was just the two of them. Left alone to stare at each other. Neither one broke away, as

if doing so would equate to losing some war of sorts.

Seokjin did not know how he did it, but he found the strength to begin speaking. “The omega servants...are they alright?” he asked, voice shaking.

Namjoon blinked. “I don’t see why they wouldn’t be.”

Seokjin took a deep breath. “It’s just that I had heard they were taken into custody.”

“Seokjin, you left,” Namjoon stated simply. He sighed and started again. There seemed to be a million things that he wanted to say, but he could only fit it all into a few words as of now. “You ran away from me. You must have *known*...so why did you come back? Was it to try and take the throne, once you heard I was finally being crowned?”

“I did not know,” Seokjin said gently.

“You knew my name,” Namjoon snapped. “How could you not have known if you knew my name? Gods, you must have thought I was so dull, falling for your little tricks and ploys. I thought something might have been off, but I thought it was just that you were nervous around alphas, that you were scared of getting hurt.”

“I was an idiot,” Namjoon chided himself. “Everything was there, all of the pieces, but I put them together wrong. I knew you couldn’t be a simple servant. You were too well-read, too pretty. Yet I had thought...”

He trailed off.

“Thought what? That it was all mere coincidence?” Seokjin scoffed, summoning a little of the fire within that had begun to smother.

“I saw the certificate from the gisaeng house and thought you were Adviser Paek’s bastard,” Namjoon admitted, narrowing his eyes

Seokjin was taken aback. He thought of the certificate that had been forged by Yerin, of Jimin who’d been furious once he’d stumbled upon the piece of paper that was a blemished copy of his own.

Namjoon did not seem to notice his shock. He ran a hand through his hair, grabbing at it, letting out a hiss. “I was a fool. You played me so easily. I guess they were right when they called you the Ice Prince, huh?”

Each assumption was like a knife, stabbing into whatever was left of Seokjin’s heart one word at a time. The tears burned hot across his cheeks, even though he did not want them to, and he found himself sniffing.

“I did not know until...that night,” he admitted. “I moved your scarf, even though you told me not to and - “

Seokjin gestured to Namjoon’s neck, the gold and crimson phoenix that he had so carefully coveted now uncovered for all to see. “I saw it. A perfect copy of my own.”

He huddled in on himself, pulling the cloak tight around his shoulders. “That was why I distanced myself. That was why I ran. I had slept with the man set to take my throne, a man I thought dead. How could I pretend like things were fine between us when they weren’t?”

Namjoon's hands curled into fists. Seokjin wondered if *he* would be the one to wrap them around Seokjin's throat.

Seokjin wondered if he would let him.

I have had my clothes torn. It would be fitting for me to be strangled and scarred as well, a perfect copy to the banquet that heralded my own father's downfall.

Namjoon closed his eyes, and Seokjin took the opportunity to look away. He had so many feelings flowing through him now, so much anger and hate and grief. He did not know what to do with all of it.

"Why did you come back, Seokjin?" Namjoon repeated.

A smile spread across Seokjin's face, a frightening, bitter thing absent of mirth and humor, and the Crown Prince replied, light and airy, "I came back to die with my friends."

"I came back to die with my friends," Seokjin told him. The expression on his face was scary, so pale and calm. Resolved to his fate. It looked nothing like the Jin he loved, the omega who would fight tooth and nail to get what he wanted, slice the throats of any alpha that stood in his way.

Namjoon almost wanted Seokjin to surge forward, to open Namjoon's throat and watch the blood seep out of him, spill down his wrists and over his heart.

But that wouldn't happen.

A stranger stared back at him with his lover's face, and Namjoon hated it.

"Is that what you think of me?" Namjoon asked, voice strained. "That I would order your execution with a flick of my finger?"

"I don't know, my king. You seemed to have no problem ordering them to strip me earlier," Seokjin said simply.

Namjoon gritted his teeth. That was different. He was merely...confused, distressed, wanting so desperately to know the truth that Seokjin would not tell him. He had to know if all of it had been a lie, if what Lord Jeon and Lady Hae were saying could have been true.

"You wouldn't say anything. You wouldn't tell me the truth. What else was I supposed to do?" Namjoon hissed.

"Trust me!" Seokjin snapped. "If you had cared for me at all, if you had been sure of what we had, you would not have let them touch me!"

Namjoon's hands unclenched as he relaxed his shoulders. He couldn't help but scoff. "Right. Just as you trusted me, running off as soon as you knew who I was. You were the one who doubted me first, Seokjin. Don't forget that now."

His heart was aching, chest near ready to break. He was done with all of this, did not want to see Seokjin for a good while. Namjoon needed time to clear his head, to think without the anger and grief that warred inside him, eating at his clarity and reason.

After a moment, Seokjin asked, "What will you do with me, if not kill me?"

Namjoon shook his head. He already knew, but he would not give Seokjin the satisfaction of

knowing his fate. Not when he doubted him so easily. He would prefer to let him stew in his uncertainty.

“I’ll have the guards escort you to your new quarters,” he said simply, leaving it at that.

Namjoon turned away from him, bracing his hands on the desk. He sighed and tried to ignore the wetness that gathered in the corners of his eyes, the unpleasant sting that followed.

He felt as if he’d been playing the part of the fool for the prince he’d so desperately loved.

The guards did as Namjoon commanded. They escorted Seokjin to a set of rooms, but the former prince thought that there might have been some sort of mistake, that something was miscommunicated.

Because they placed him in his mother’s rooms.

The quarters of a queen.

Granted, the rooms looked different now. They lacked his mother’s creative, decorating touch, her colorful rugs and seats. The last time that Seokjin had entered his mother’s quarters, everything had been covered in white sheets, preserved from wear and tear by the linens. He’d been looking for a necklace of hers with help from Jae, and the two of them were among the few who had the king’s permission to enter the rooms.

His mother’s quarters had been her deathbed, and they were regarded as a sort of unspoken, holy ground among the palace inhabitants.

Even the king, in his madness, had not allowed his new consorts to take up the space left behind by his former queen.

Namjoon and the others had moved her things, cleaning everything out to replace it with furniture and fixtures new and fresh. The colors were brighter, sheets and curtains a startling red, and most everything else was fixed with gold.

Seokjin sat on the bed, running his hand over the elaborately embroidered cushions and sheets. Everything was so soft, as if it were made of silk.

It was a rather odd cell for a prisoner such as himself to be living in.

Hadn’t Namjoon told the nobles he would throw him into a jail cell to rot?

Seokjin didn’t really understand what was going on, but then again he hadn’t understood anything for a while now.

A sudden knock on the door surprised him. Seokjin didn’t even need to grant the visitor permission, however, as they entered a second later.

“Prince Seokjin,” Min Yoongi greeted him.

Seokjin snorted. “What do you want, Lord Min?”

“I came to see how you were. You must be hungry. It’s past lunchtime. Just tell me what you want, and I’ll have it sent up from the kitchens.”

Seokjin shifted in his seat and narrowed his eyes. “If you’re offering,” he muttered. “But won’t

Namjoon be angry to hear that you're treating me so well?"

Yoongi shook his head. "I was told to come check on you, and grant you any requests as long as they're within my power."

Seokjin pretended to think for a minute or two, not wanting to appear too eager. "The omegas working in this palace. What happened to them?"

Yoongi frowned instantly. "Lord Jeon allowed my cousin's head to inflate," he sneered. "There was a bit of an...issue. But it's fine. They're alive. Jeongguk made sure of that."

"Have them brought to me," Seokjin commanded immediately, before softening. "If you can, of course."

"Only a few omega servants?" Yoongi asked, raising an eyebrow. He looked genuinely confused. "That is all you ask of me?"

"That is everything I ask of you," Seokjin replied.

Seokjin wondered if Yoongi might refuse, but the other omega ended up nodding his head. "Consider it done. What about your meal?"

"I don't care. Just send something. Whatever they have leftover will be good enough for me," Seokjin shrugged his shoulders.

Yoongi had that look on his face again, the befuddlement spread across his face. "No beef brisket? No braised seafood?"

The prince at first did not understand what Yoongi was referring to. Then he remembered. A few of his favorite dishes, the types of food he'd insisted on having back so many months ago.

Seokjin wanted to laugh. He'd gone from loving food to hating it. Yoongi had missed out on so much. "No," Seokjin agreed quietly. "I don't care for any of that anymore."

Yoongi shook his head, but made to leave.

"Yoongi," Seokjin addressed him, making the other omega stop. "Why are you acting so kind to me?"

The Uprising, the poisoning of everyone Seokjin knew, the stabbing of Yoongi's hand. It would not be so easy to forget such grievances, and neither Yoongi nor Seokjin were the forgiving type to start with.

Yoongi smiled, laughing a little as if Seokjin had said something very funny. His hand, scarred and distorted-looking, rested on the door.

"Well, it wouldn't do me any good to remain on your bad side, would it? And...I think you could use a friend."

With that Yoongi left and Seokjin was once more alone.

He laid back on the bed, curling into a ball on top of the covers. It had been so long since he'd slept in a bed this comfortable, yet it was no longer comforting. He missed his bed in the servants' quarters with all of the other omegas. Seokjin missed Jimin and Ru and Leah. He missed working in the kitchens and talking to Suran.

The tears came, though he had thought he'd run out of those by now, and Seokjin slowly but surely cried himself to sleep.

Hours later, a knock on the door woke him. Seokjin sat up, hair messy and eyes swollen. He knew he looked like a mess, but there was no time to make himself presentable. Even if he did have the time, he did not think he could summon the effort and energy that such a thing required.

Seokjin rested his fists on his lap, unclenching them. He made himself relax, then called out carefully. "Come in."

He thought it might be Yoongi back, fulfilling Seokjin's request, but no. It was Lady Hae and a maidservant, holding a bundle. Lady Hae curtsied and her maid followed.

"Hello, my prince. Do you mind if I have a seat?" Lady Hae gestured to the table a few feet away.

"Go ahead," Seokjin allowed.

He watched with rapt attention as the maid trailed behind her. Lady Hae lifted her skirts as she took a seat at his table, resting her hands in her lap. The maidservant stood by her side.

"Have you come to gloat?" Seokjin asked.

Lady Hae blinked. "I don't know what you're talking about - "

"Oh, please! As if you didn't take pleasure in seeing me brought before their nobility, stripped of what little dignity I had left!" Seokjin spat, balling his hands into fists.

Hae lifted her chin up in the face of his fury, and it looked like - but no, it *couldn't be* - something similar to steel in her eyes. Seokjin felt his anger ebb away slowly, blood cooling as he turned calculating, assessing Lady Hae for the first time in a long time.

The other omega tilted her head to the side and smiled. "I would be lying if I said it did not bring me the slightest joy to see you put in your place for once. You must have enjoyed embarrassing me ten months ago, yes?"

Seokjin stood from the bed on shaky legs and made his way over to table, sitting in front of Lady Hae. He couldn't help but return her smile. "My, my, Lady Hae. You've finally learned how to play the game."

"Barely," she commented. "I'll never be as good as you, I'm afraid."

"Oh? You seem to have picked the winning side, aligning yourself with the rebels," Seokjin pointed out. His smile turned self-deprecating. "And here I am. Nothing more than a loser."

Lady Hae scoffed. "I would hardly call *that* aligning myself with the Bangtan rebels."

Seokjin tilted his head to the side. "Really? You sold me out."

Lady Hae shook her head, almost indignant. "I did no such thing. I never gave you up to the rebels, I only confirmed your identity. They heard what they wanted to hear from me and that was that."

"Why?" Seokjin asked. "Why resurface now? Why help them out at all?"

Lady Hae opened up her mouth, but a squalling sound interrupted her. The maidservant began to move the bundle in her hands, rocking it from one side to the next and shushing it. Lady Hae opened her arms.

“Here,” she instructed, voice so very soft. “Give him to me.”

Her servant did just that, and Seokjin was now at the level that he could see the tiny pink face peeking out, twisted into an angry expression. Lady Hae cooed at the bundle, making all sorts of sounds to soothe it.

“A baby,” Seokjin said. He felt his jaw drop, eyes lighting up in genuine shock, and he felt something flutter in his chest.

The thing shushed once it had its mother’s attention, thoroughly satisfied, and Lady Hae looked up at Seokjin, beaming.

“His name is Seongsu,” she informed him. “After his father.”

“He’s Lord Hae’s?” Seokjin clarified, surprised.

Lady Hae shot him a look. “Of course,” she replied, a little miffed that Seokjin presumed she might have bore someone else’s child. “He’s three months old. I was...two months along when I left the palace. I didn’t even know until I was settled in the countryside.”

Her expression turned to one of grief. “It was hard when I learned what had happened to my husband...so incredibly hard, but our bond had never been particularly strong. There for a while I thought the grief would make me lose my baby. I had my sister and her family to help me, though, and after a while, Lord Min came for me.”

“In fact,” she continued, “to answer your question: this little one is the reason I’m here today. All that I have done, I have done for him.”

“What do you mean?”

“I am an omega widow with a son,” Lady Hae replied, hands tightening around her bundle. “Our prospects are bleak. The rebels took over the lands of all who died in the Uprising. My son has no inheritance to speak of. However...”

“They promised you land,” Seokjin surmised. “Land and a fortune and a title, if you did as they said and identified me here today.”

“Now you’re catching on,” Lady Hae’s smile grew. “All of my lord’s lost treasures would go to his heir, but only if I did as they asked.”

“Did you know it was really me then? Or would you have told them an impostor was the Crown Prince?”

“For little Seongsu?” Lady Hae asked, raising an eyebrow. “I would have told them a fair-haired burly alpha with a heart of gold was you.”

“My complete opposite, huh,” Seokjin noted dryly.

He stared at the bundle in Lady Hae’s arms, still in a state of disbelief. “Why have you come here, Lady Hae? I thought perhaps to gloat, but you’ve told me you’re done with that.”

“I know how things will work. My husband’s lands are rightfully my son’s lands. For now. They handed out my reward so easily with a piece of paper, and perhaps they will leave us alone for a while. But the time will come in which someone decides they want a little more from the Bangtan Four than they were given. They will come for my son, the infant lord with no power behind him,

and they will take what they believe is their due.”

Seokjin inclined his head, agreeing with what she said. Lady Hae had analyzed her situation perfectly. He had to say he was a little impressed. Seokjin met the other omega’s eyes. The two of them were the last imperialists of his father’s court.

The realization was harrowing.

Better the devil I know than the devil I do not. He wondered if she had a similar train of thought.

“I’m surprised you can even stand to look at me,” Seokjin said honestly. “My father was the one who poisoned your mate. Don’t you hate me?”

Lady Hae’s lips thinned, eyes darkening. “Your father killed my dear Seongsu, and yes, that’s something I will never forgive.”

She looked down at her son. “But you were the one who schemed to send me away, my prince. Lady Nam had written to me and told me that. Even if it was mean-spirited, even if I thought I hated you for it, you were the one who ended up saving my life. My son’s life. I owe you something for that, I think.”

Seokjin sucked in a deep breath. The glass of everything he was trying to keep together start to fall apart again. “Even if I wanted to, Lady Hae, I have no power here to help. I can’t protect myself, let alone anybody else. You should not align yourself with me.”

Hae shook her head. “No, that’s not true! Don’t you see, my prince? All of the servants I’ve talked to spoke of you with stars in their eyes, and the rebels seethe in their jealousies. You can raise so high in their court, and the king? He looks at you as if-”

“Enough,” Seokjin cut in, suddenly feeling sick. “That’s not true. Don’t say that. He-”

He broke off, unable to finish. *We hate each other. He’s stolen my crown. I lied to him. Whatever we had went up in smokes as soon as he learned the truth of whose blood my veins carried.*

“You have influence, my prince, and a mind that knows what to do with that,” Hae tried again.

“What do you know?” Seokjin snapped. “You’ve been here less than a day? Things are not as simple as you make it sound. I can’t just...make things happen like I did before when I was a prince.”

“I’ve known you longer than a week,” Lady Hae said softly. “I know you better than you think. The Kim Seokjin I knew wouldn’t just sit in his room and mope about how horrible his life was. My prince would be scheming, plotting. He wouldn’t let anyone walk over him without getting them back thricefold for it.”

It was too much. He felt himself break, and the things he had been realizing this last week, the ugly things he’d thought of, came spilling out.

“He’s dead! That Kim Seokjin is dead, all right? He died with Lord Mun and Jae, maybe even Jiyeon! There is no Kim Seokjin anymore!” Seokjin cried, chest tight as he pounded a fist against the table to accentuate each of his points. “Kim Seokjin is dead. You won’t get him back.”

Little Seongsu began to cry.

Lady Hae stared at him, like she was looking at a ghost, and Seokjin feared in that moment that she

was seeing something else - someone else - in particular. Hae opened and closed her mouth, not knowing what to say.

“Quiet Seongsu and take him back to my rooms,” she instructed, handing the bundle over. The girl took the baby into her arms carefully, nodding her head and doing as she was told.

Lady Hae fixed Seokjin with a glare. “What is wrong with you?” she hissed.

Seokjin wanted to laugh. “So very, very many things Lady Hae. So much has changed. I have lost everything...again and again and again.”

He spread his hands out on the table, staring at his palms. “I’ve started to wonder what the point is of reaching for what I want. Everything I’ve ever owned, it slips through my fingers like grains of sand. I have nothing.”

Lady Hae continued to stare at him, eyes roving over his pathetic form.

“Just leave,” Seokjin felt his shoulders shake. He wanted so much to cry and finish what he’d wanted to do, but he couldn’t with her in here.

Lady Hae remained instead. “Fine. Kim Seokjin is dead. Then who are you?”

Seokjin stilled. “What?”

“I said who are you? Who am I talking to right now? Is it Kim Seokjin’s ghost? Or is it a servant named Jin?” Lady Hae quipped, eyes narrowed.

“I am,” Seokjin began, but couldn’t finish.

I am...?

I was Kim Seokjin, Crown Prince, half-brother to Prince Taehyung, firstborn to the former king. I was the blood of the Phoenix, the Ice Prince, the Serene Prince.

I was Park Jin, the kitchen servant, friend to Jimin, bastard son to Adviser Paek. I was the lover of Captain Joon, a liar, a dreamer.

And I have become...

Something I am afraid of.

“What did you want to accomplish when you let Kim Namjoon court you?” Lady Hae questioned.

“I wanted to get revenge,” Seokjin breathed. “I wanted to use him...to take down all of those fuckers one step at a time.”

“So what changed?”

I stopped caring about revenge and started to caring about him, Seokjin can’t bring himself to say.

Lady Hae hummed. “What would you say if I told you I know who sold you out? The real culprit behind your humiliation today. I know the whole plan, actually.”

Seokjin’s head jerked up. He felt the flaring of something familiar in his chest, a fire he could not stop. “No,” he breathed. “I do not want to know. You cannot make me into your, your tool to get revenge. I’m done with all of - “

Lady Hae's lips twisted into a smirk and slowly the name that Seokjin had feared he might hear left her lips.

"Kim Taehyung."

"No!" Seokjin snarled. "There's no way. He would NOT -"

"Why not? Lord Jeon has secured him whatever he could want in an omega. All Taehyung had to do was tell them where you were, and the omega was his," Lady Hae shrugged her shoulders. "Or at least that's what I heard Min Duran telling Lord Min. Perhaps I misunderstood somehow."

Seokjin remained quiet. He thought of his baby brother, his hands reaching up towards Seokjin so that they might watch the fireworks together. Taehyung, who had saved him from the carnage of the Uprising, only to feed him to the wolves with one word.

No wonder he does not wear the phoenix on his skin, something in Seokjin hissed triumphantly. *He is not worthy.*

"Shall I tell you how it was planned out?" Lady Hae examined her nails, long and red.

"Min Duran would torture your friends for information in the morning, preferably discreetly. After all, you were nowhere to be found the night before. Lord Jeon needed you if he wanted to prove anything to Namjoon. Your back was the most substantial proof he had, yet it was nowhere to be found. Lord Woo was sent to gather a few soldiers, to send them out to look for you."

Seokjin felt his hands begin to shake, felt his muscles tense up as the phoenix shrieked. Lady Hae stood from her seat and began to circle the table with a few languid steps.

"After the coronation," she continued, "if you weren't to be found, then Lord Jeon would tell Namjoon anyway, with a few of his supporting witnesses of course. After all, a play needs its spectators. I was told to say you had contacted me and told me you were disguising yourself as a servant in the palace. Min Yoongi would eventually back me up and reveal that you were an omega. Lord Jeon would probably agree, saying he heard it from your brother himself. Namjoon might be convinced, with everyone telling him the same story. And yet -"

Lady Hae leaned in, mouth next to Seokjin's ear. "You played your part more beautifully than they could have ever hoped. You walked right back into the palace, right into the spotlight, like a lamb to the slaughter!"

"Shut up," Seokjin muttered. "Just shut up. I've heard enough."

"And now do you know the reason they have put you in these rooms, in your mother's quarters? It is because they plan on making you a consort, my prince. You'll give birth to plenty of little heirs, each one of them a step ahead of you in the line of succession. If you don't have children? Well, they plan on having Hyewon and Min Duran for that, too, don't they? Namjoon's own little harem," she cooed.

It was as if Seokjin's vision was dyed red.

He drowned in it, in his anger and his hate and his rage, let it fester inside of him and build. No, no, no. He would not allow something like this. He would not just roll over, just lie back and spread his legs again, let them truss him up like a broodmare and parade him around for all to see.

Seokjin would not *accept* this. He could not endure the humiliation, the scorn.

He thought of his mother.

The Crown Princess, reduced to nothing more than a floozy, a womb who only worked once. Her eyes which grew dimmer by the day, her hair that lost its shine, lips dry and cracked, so skinny and pale as the bite on her neck began to leak and ooze and spittle.

The demon that had spoken to him during his fever had warned of this circle, of the fate that would befall him. *Ouroboros will swallow you whole*, it sneered. *Everything that was connected...cycles back around. Again and again and again. Such is the fate of the Kims.*

It had been a warning for Seokjin, that he would follow in his mother's footsteps. Seokjin leaned over, feeling as if he might be sick. He threaded his fingers through his hair, holding his head in his hands.

This can't be. No. I won't allow it to happen to me. Seokjin jerked his head up, looking around. *I would rather die.*

"Now, my prince. Don't get too angry. Haven't you heard that saying? Don't get mad-"

"Get even," Seokjin finished viciously. "Yes, I know!"

"There it is. That look in your eyes," Lady Hae breathed, clapping her hands together. "I wonder, was it Prince Taehyung's betrayal or...?"

"All of it," Seokjin hissed, wood of the table creaking as he squeezed the edges. "The extent of all their planning, just so they could corner me? I will not forgive them so easily."

"You've given up your revenge once before, though, haven't you?" Lady Hae pointed out, voice a murmur. "What's different this time?"

Seokjin couldn't help it. He laughed. "It was a crown they stole before. A gaudy one, at that. I don't think I really wanted the throne anyways. This time? They've wronged me personally. Taehyung has...betrayed me. Yoongi and the others, they seem to think they can maneuver me around like a child, to strip me and humiliate me, then mate me to their king."

"So what will you do?"

Seokjin felt his dry lips curl into a smirk, cracking painfully. "What I have always done," he proclaimed, raising his chin. His hands relaxed at his side. "I will play the part, the wolf in sheep's clothing, but I will not forget my purpose this time."

And if he forgot? If he allowed himself to become lost again, closed his eyes and gave up?

There were ways of escaping his mother's fate, more cowardly and permanent methods that Seokjin thought may help the rebels more than hinder them. He would resort to that only if all hope was lost.

And Namjoon?

Seokjin felt his dead heart swell, overcome with all kinds of emotions. *It may be hard*, he reasoned. *But I will make him pay like all of the rest.*

yessss, jin is hellbent on revenge now! but what does this mean for namjoon? :/

there will be a happy ending, i promise!! this chapter served as the resolution to seokjin's lowest point in the story. the only way for him to go now is up! jin will be bitter and angry for a while, but there will be a lot of healing and revenge in the future to tend to his wounds.

next chapter: we will find out how the omegas are doing, vminkook drama occurs, and preparations for another ceremony are underway?

come talk to me on [twitter](#) or [curiouscat](#) !! i love hearing your guys' thoughts and answering your questions!! thank you so much for reading!!

Propositions

Chapter Summary

Jeongguk saves Jimin and learns of his connection to Taehyung. Seokjin receives an olive branch and a warning. Yerin meets up with an old friend.

Chapter Notes

tw: implied cannibalism (of sorts?) near the end of the chapter

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Jeongguk had meant to spite his mother, if even only a little. The purpose of a walk had originally been to clear his head, to get his mind off of Taehyung and the shackle around his neck. Now it was to make a point to his mother, to seek out the interrogations that his father had begun so early before the coronation.

He smelled him before he saw him. That sweet, tantalizing smell spiked in distress, in anger and hate. It reminded him a little of how Taehyung smelled now.

Jeongguk would recognize that omega's scent anywhere.

Jimin, he thought. One of the servants his mother had mentioned must be Jimin.

He heard the screaming and cries, which made his steps quicker, strides longer. The scene he came upon was not the worst thing he had seen, but it was certainly pathetic, tugging at his heartstrings as he surveyed the five omegas, all lined up in a row.

Their hands were tied behind their backs, uniforms torn and bloodied. Some of them were crying, eyes shut as their bodies trembled. One was as straight as could be, looking down at the ground even as blood dripped down her cheek.

Then there was Jimin.

Jimin, with a swollen jaw and blackened eye, looking up at the guard before him with hate seeping out of his gaze. Jeongguk kept his composure and shoved down the instinct that craved to croon in comfort. He could not afford to be soft yet.

Not when one of the guards was raising his sword, leveling it as if he meant to cut Jimin's throat.

"Stop!" Jeongguk snapped.

The guard did not seem to hear his command, or if he did, did not mean to obey it. Jeongguk would not allow such insolence. He was tired of the dismissals that came with his nature, with the ignorance and sneers. Jeongguk lunged forward, wrapping his hand around the guard's wrist and squeezing so impossibly tight that he heard something crack.

With a yelp, the guard let go of the sword, and it fell to the ground at their feet with a clatter.

“Y-young Master Jeon,” he stuttered. “What are you doing all the way out here?”

Jeongguk narrowed his eyes and yanked his hand away and stepped back. “I could ask you the same thing,” he said.

The guard remained silent. Another spoke up for him, replying, “Young Mistress Min commanded us to finish her work. We were supposed to get rid of these servants, since they would not tell her anything.”

Jeongguk cocked his head to the side, looking at the group of guards with a glare. “Oh? And just what were they supposed to tell Min Duran?”

The guards murmured amongst themselves, no one wanting to speak up and incriminate anyone. Jeongguk’s patience began to wear thin, and he was about to grab the sword off of the ground and threaten them, when one of the omegas spoke up.

“They wanted us to tell them where the omega servant Jin went,” the girl said quietly, her calm eyes meeting Jeongguk’s.

Jeongguk’s face paled. So his father had told Min Duran, who searched for Prince Seokjin now? “Ah,” Jeongguk made a noise in the back of his throat. “I see.”

He looked back at the guards. “How long have all of you been employed at the palace?” Jeongguk asked.

One guard piped up. “Since the Uprising, Young Master!”

Jeongguk straightened his shoulders, lifting his chin. “And do you normally torture omegas?”

“We were just following orders,” another murmured.

Jeongguk laughed, an incredulous expression twisted onto his face. “Forgive me. I may not look it, but I know how to be a soldier. I understand. But if I told you to go back home and kill your parents, would you do it?”

The guards threw themselves down and began to whine and beg and plead. “Young Master!” some cried. “Please have mercy. We did not mean...we were only doing our duty!”

“That was the problem with the mad king, don’t you know? Everyone following orders and doing his bidding, handing over their own wives and exiling their heirs,” Jeongguk mused.

He waved his hand. “See that this mindless torture doesn’t continue, *especially* if someone as low as Min Duran commands you to follow through on it. You’re dismissed.”

The guards scurried away, the one fetching his sword and clutching it to his chest as he ran. Jeongguk almost wanted to laugh again, but he did not. Instead he turned to the omegas and began to unfasten the rope behind their backs, tying their hands together.

The two boys, once they were released, thanked Jeongguk on their knees. Jeongguk flushed and told them it was not necessary. “This should not have happened in the first place! What were they executing you for? Such a thing done on royal grounds should only be permitted by the king, and I doubt they asked for his verdict!”

One of the girls rubbed her wrists and ducked her head. "The future king...is busy, is he not? Perhaps he did not think it important enough for his judgement, Young Master," the girl reasoned.

The solemn girl nodded and responded in a voice hoarse from screaming, "Thank you. We are grateful for your mercy."

Finally Jeongguk came to Jimin. The omega's gaze had not lost any of its hate as it drifted to the mark on Jeongguk's neck, the raw and dark red imprint of teeth, but something in his eyes changed.

"I would tell you thank you," Jimin began, "but I'm afraid the life you saved was not worth even that."

Jimin had changed in these last few months, regaining some of the color in his face, and he looked less melancholic. Jeongguk wondered what he should say to this omega who had rejected his kindness so long ago, whose future mate he had ruthlessly killed.

"No thanks necessary," Jeongguk replied. For some reason, he found himself reaching out, wiping away the blood that had been smeared across Jimin's jaw. "I owed you a life debt, after all."

Jimin smiled, though it looked very wrong. "Oh, Jeongguk. You owe me nothing."

Jeongguk frowned, unsure of what Jimin meant. He grabbed the omega's shoulders, helping him to stand on shaky legs. "Here, let me take you to a physician. You all need to have your wounds looked at."

Jeongguk did just that, and after instructing the royal physician to treat the omegas with proper care, he informed them he would be back to check on them after the coronation.

"Is Taehyung here?" Jimin asked before he left, stopping Jeongguk in his tracks.

"You know Taehyung?" Jeongguk questioned, mouth open slightly as he stared in shock.

There was nothing on Jimin's face to give him away, neither sadness or happiness or disgust. "Yes," he finally responded. "Unfortunately I have something I need to return to him."

"I could give it to him if you like," Jeongguk offered.

Jimin shook his head, mouth twitching. "This is the sort of gift that should be returned in person," he insisted rather cryptically.

"I'll tell him you need to speak with him then. After the coronation," Jeongguk nodded his head and left, though the emotions that splintered across Jimin's eyes at the words gave him pause.

He did not understand why Jimin would be so unhappy with his mate, but he felt something in his chest clench, the feeling of raw apprehension nagging at him, as if he stood at the edge of a thing so ugly and horrible.

Once the ceremony was over, which Jeongguk and Taehyung had sat through rather sullenly, refusing to play the sort of part Lord Jeon demanded of them, they were taken back to their rooms. Jeongguk slowly began to unclip the lily pin from his hair as Taehyung paced in the reflection of his mirror.

"Something's wrong," Taehyung muttered. "I can feel it. Why did your father gather a few of the nobles in Namjoon's study?"

Jeongguk stilled. He did not know if he should tell Taehyung what he knew, then he realized it would not matter because Taehyung would find out anyway. It was better that he not try to hide it.

“He’s telling them about your brother,” Jeongguk revealed. “Probably everything that you told me. But don’t worry, I don’t think Seokjin’s here anymore.”

Taehyung’s face paled. “What?” he hissed. “How did you learn this? Why are you just telling me now?”

Jeongguk turned around so that he might be face to face with his husband. “This morning,” he said stiffly. “My father and his allies were content to try to execute the omega servants of this palace because they did not provide any information on Seokjin’s location. It just makes sense that they don’t know where he is anymore.”

Taehyung stumbled, but regained his footing, and he looked to the floor. “Do you think that he knows?” the alpha asked helplessly. “That I told?”

“I don’t know, Taehyung,” Jeongguk sighed. “If he doesn’t, he will soon. They will do what he can to tear you two apart even more. Divide and conquer, as they say.”

After a moment of silence, Taehyung furrowed his brow. “So your father...he didn’t succeed in his executions?”

Jeongguk shook his head. “Luckily, I stopped it, but only just barely. A second later and I fear I would have been too late.”

The omega shifted uncomfortably, trying to scatter away the images his mind conjured up of Jimin dead, bloody and cold. His hand rose to tug at the front of his robes, as if to dispel the tightness in his chest. “Oh,” he murmured. “One of the omegas seemed to know you. It’s funny. It’s the same one that rejected me.”

Taehyung looked up, frowning. “I don’t think I know any palace omegas.”

Jeongguk turned back to his mirror, rubbing off the rouge on his lips. “He said he had something to return to you. A gift. I don’t know. Maybe he was lying.”

“What was his name?”

It was just a name, the name of an omega Taehyung might or might not even know it. Perhaps he knew Jimin’s fiancée, and once he learned Jeongguk had killed him, he’d hate Jeongguk even more.

“Jimin,” Jeongguk admitted finally. “His name is Jimin.”

It was just a name, and yet it meant everything.

Taehyung’s face contorted, eyes flaring with a sort of passion Jeongguk had never seen before. Jeongguk felt jealousy curdle at his mate’s panic, the twisting of a sharpness in his belly.

Jeongguk sat back. “You know him,” he breathed, couldn’t help but chuckle a little. “You actually know him.”

“You said he wants to see me,” Taehyung stated, to clarify things.

“He wants to return something to you,” Jeongguk shot back. “Though by the look on your face, I think you know what it is.”

Taehyung shook his head frantically. "I don't...that is, I hope it is not what I think it is, but..."

"How do you know Jimin?" Jeongguk asked, raising an eyebrow. His hands curled into fists, his inner omega snarling and clawing its way to the surface.

Taehyung sat on the bed, holding his head in his hands. "I only know one Jimin," he admitted softly. "And if they are one and the same, then he was once my fiance."

How easy it was for a world to topple down around one person, a culmination of so many horrible revelations, of sickening thoughts that just made one want to sit down and scream and tear their hair out and cry.

Jeongguk felt his eyes burning, the mark on his neck flaring with pain. So this was how it felt, to be the villain of the story? He had been the one to come between Taehyung and Jimin, had torn them apart in a such a permanent way.

"I see," Jeongguk somehow managed to get out. He squeezed his eyes shut, unable to bear the brunt of Taehyung's feelings, the look on his face.

"Where is he now?" Taehyung demanded, standing.

A knock on the door distracted Jeongguk from answering, though even if it hadn't he was unsure if he would have willingly given up Jimin's location.

"Come in," Jeongguk granted them entry, anger cooling slightly.

It was Lady Jeon, her face flushed and hair mussed. "Jeongguk, oh my darling, have you heard?"

She came over to him, grabbing his hands in her own. "Prince Seokjin has returned! He came right up to the front gates. They're saying Lord Min permitted him entry!"

"No," Taehyung murmured. "Why would he come back if he left?"

"What's going on? Where is he now?" Jeongguk wondered.

Lady Jeon shook her head. "I'm not sure. I just know that it can't be good for us now that he's back! Oh, gods! What are we going to do?"

Taehyung had stood up. "I need to leave," he insisted frantically. "Seokjin will need me. I have to make sure he's ok, that they're not going to hurt him."

Jeongguk stood as well, grabbed him by the arm. He swallowed the lump in the throat, the voice inside that wanted to cry out, Don't leave me, don't leave me, please!

"You won't be able to see him," Jeongguk reasoned. "The guards won't let you leave. You won't make it a foot outside these rooms before they shove you back inside!"

"I don't care!" Taehyung snarled. "I have to see him!"

Jeongguk felt frustrated and his grip tightened. "Have you thought that you might be doing more harm than good if you go to him? Once they tell him who told, I don't think he'll very much want to see you."

"Gods, you're a hateful little thing!" Taehyung spat, pulling away. "All of this is your fault in the first - "

“You think I don’t know that?” Jeongguk interjected, yelling. His cheeks felt wet, the traitorous tears running down them. He pressed a hand to his chest, which felt as if it would cave in at any moment. “I thought I was saving your life, I thought you might rather be mated to me than some stranger, yet all you did was spit at my kindness. Do you think you’re the only one trapped in a loveless mating? Haven’t you seen my mark, how it oozes and swells with your hatred?”

Taehyung shut his eyes, took a shaky breath and finally made one last futile plea. “He is my *brother*, Jeongguk!”

Jeongguk shook his head, found his courage once more. “If this continues any longer,” he swallowed, “I fear I might die. And then the trade you made, this life for your brother’s secrets? It will all have been in vain.”

Taehyung remained silent, at a loss for words. He would not look at Jeongguk, perhaps taken over by guilt, if it was possible for him to even feel that.

“Just...wait, Taehyung,” Jeongguk insisted. “If your brother wants to see you, if he needs you, he’ll come to you.”

Slowly, the alpha nodded his head. “Fine,” he muttered, turning to head into the other room. As he left, Jeongguk’s mother - who had watched all of this - came forward to rest her hands on his shoulders, finally breaking her silence. “Jeongguk, you musn’t say such things about your mating! Marks are so...touchy! Especially after the first month! It’ll get better, I promise you! So stop with all of this fatalistic talk. It invites bad luck. Besides, we have other things to worry about right now.”

The omega turned towards her, narrowing his eyes. “Like what? What are you talking about? Why is it such a problem that Prince Seokjin is back? Namjoon has already been crowned. This changes nothing!”

“Oh, Jeongguk,” she sighed. “This changes everything. Why did you think your father wanted a Kim heir so badly?”

Jeongguk pushed away from her. “To gain prestige? I don’t know. You tell me.”

Lady Jeon fiddled with her hands helplessly. “To overthrow Kim Namjoon! Your father has it in his head that once he has a child of Jeon and Kim blood, he can install them on the throne instead. A puppet king. You must tell me, have you bled since the mating?”

“Why are you admitting to all of this?” Jeongguk asked quietly. She admitted to treason so freely... he did not understand her line of reasoning. His mother reached out once more, but he jerked away again.

“You need to know the importance of your position,” she insisted. “Now that Seokjin, the Crown Prince, has returned. That’s another person in the way. Seokjin will inherit before any son of yours. And if Namjoon and Seokjin marry like Lord Min has always intended...”

She sighed and shook her head. “Please, Jeongguk. Have you bled?”

“Yes,” he admitted.

She raised a hand to her forehead, as if she might faint.

“Come here, Mother. Lie down,” Jeongguk led her to the bed. He needed to see what else she would say, if there was anything more incriminating she might reveal.

“I’ll have to send a doctor to you,” she cried. “To check your fertility, to prescribe you a few supplements. Jeongguk, you must understand. Now that you’re mated to Kim Taehyung, you must have a child, preferably within the next year.”

“Of course,” Jeongguk said, voice hollow. But it was nothing more than a lie.

As long as my father lives, he swore to himself, I will never, ever bear Taehyung a child.

It was no longer about protecting Taehyung’s life, but Namjoon’s as well. He would not allow his father to depose his oldest friend.

After Lady Hae left him, it was less than an hour before Yoongi returned with what Seokjin requested and then left, a knowing glint in his eyes. Something within Seokjin wanted to cry out at the sight of his friends, bruised and bloodied as they were.

Jimin bowed very stiffly and greeted him as, “Your Grace.”

The others followed suit, though with wide eyes and open mouths, shocked as they recognized who Prince Seokjin was. Seokjin waved his hand. “Enough of the formalities,” he insisted, lump in his throat. “We’re all friends here. Come, let me look at all of you.”

Jimin was the first to comprehend, or perhaps the only one who wasn’t weighed down by the realization like the others.

He surged forward and wrapped his arms around Seokjin’s midsection, burying his face in his stomach as he kneeled. “Seokjin!” he cried. “Why did you come back?”

Seokjin patted Jimin’s hair, trying in vain to smooth down some of the mussed sections which stood straight up. “I came back for you,” he murmured, looking up. “For all of you. I’d heard they’d had you arrested and I...wouldn’t stand for it.”

“Are you really Prince Seokjin?” Leah sputtered, disbelieving still. She looked a little ridiculous, her throat wrapped in very thick, gaudy bandages.

Seokjin inclined his head. “Yes,” he admitted softly, holding out his hand for Leah to take. “I hope you can understand why I couldn’t tell you. I did not know how safe it was.”

Leah frowned but reached over and threaded her fingers through his own, sniffing. “They wanted us to tell them where you were. You, an omega from the kitchens! I guess it makes sense if they were after a prince instead.”

“None of us said a word,” Ru spoke up. Her eye was swollen once more. “No matter how hard they hit us or what they threatened us with. We didn’t say anything.”

Seokjin’s heart swelled. He took his other hand off of Jimin’s head and made room for Ru to come forward and cuddle as well. The omega didn’t even bat an eye as she did just that, beginning to cry with small little huffs.

“I’m sorry,” Seokjin murmured. “All of this happened because of me.”

Jimin lifted his head, wiping at his nose with his sleeve. “No it’s not!” he protested. “You didn’t order to have us arrested, didn’t beat us! It’s not your fault.”

The others murmured their assent. Seokjin took in a deep, shaky breath. Their kindness was a breath of fresh air after all that he had been through, and he felt himself relax, finally able to unwind before his friends.

“Regardless I have a proposition for all of you,” he began. Seokjin had been thinking of it ever since Lady Hae had left, mind whirring as he tried to make plans for what he could do for these omegas. But now that he had to say it, it was different.

Leah leaned back on her heels. “What is it?”

Seokjin swallowed the lump in his throat and made sure that he did not falter as he spoke.

“If you want to leave this place, leave the palace behind and find work elsewhere - good work, that will pay you well - then I will prepare it for each of you,” he offered.

Jimin blinked. “You’re saying - “

“I’ll let you all go. You have the option to leave. I wouldn’t blame you, especially after how horribly this palace has treated you. But, if you want to stay by my side, if you want to stay here with me, I’ll make that possible too.”

Seokjin dared not to breathe as he waited for their responses. All of them stared at him, some furrowing their brows while others froze. He wanted so desperately for them to stay, to not be left alone, and yet he was giving them the opportunity to leave if they wanted.

Perhaps it was thanks for how they’d helped him leave before, in their own small ways, and yet Seokjin realized that something like this was far beyond what the Seokjin of the past would have done. If he had wanted them to stay, he would not have offered to make them go, would have done everything in his power to chain them to his side if they themselves brought it up.

“Do you mean, that we would serve under *you*?” Jimin asked, frowning.

“Is that...is that allowed? What would the new king think?” Leah twisted her dress in her hands anxiously.

At the mention of Namjoon, Seokjin’s face went blank. “The king will give you to me, if that’s what you want, because it will be the only wedding gift I ask of him.”

“No!” Ru gasped. “You mean you’re...? Marrying the king?”

“No way!” Leah shook her head. “You don’t even know each other, do you?”

Seokjin couldn’t help but smile, a nasty twisted thing that appeared on his face. “We know each other better than you think,” he admitted. “But that’s all I’ll say for now. Just know that whatever your wishes are, I’ll make it happen.”

Minwoo and the other boy, who had been silent this entire time, stepped forward. “I,” he started, then cleared his throat. “We think we want to leave. It’s just like you said. We don’t want to work here anymore.”

Seokjin nodded his head. He had expected their answer and took it in stride. He did not even know one of their names, so their departure would not pain him as the others’ would.

“Alright. Just one thing,” he pointed to the nameless boy, the other stable hand. “What’s your name?”

“Hyejin,” the boy said, rather bashfully. “My name is Hyejin, Your Grace.”

“Hyejin,” Seokjin repeated, then laughed. “Yes, it suits you.”

He dismissed them with a wave. “Thank you for your help. I’ll try to arrange everything by the end of the week.”

Minwoo and Hyejin bowed, then left. It was Leah, Ru, and Jimin who remained. Jimin gave Seokjin a look.

“If you think I would leave now, then you’re crazy. I’ll stay with you until the very end,” he promised.

Ru was next. “You’re my family, Seokjin,” she insisted. “I won’t leave you behind.”

And finally Leah, who sighed heavily, as if she were doing him a great service. “I *guess* I can stay as well. Though I don’t know how much help I’ll be. I’m used to taking notes for the court, not doing hair or makeup like these two!”

Seokjin smiled. “Oh, please! Who else could put up with your attitude but me, Leah?”

Leah rolled her eyes, but begrudgingly agreed, corners of her mouth lifting slightly.

Seokjin couldn’t help but take a deep breath, blinking away the wetness that formed in his eyes. He had never cried before, yet now it seemed like he was crying all of the time. “I’m glad,” he admitted softly, “that I’ll have you three by my side. I don’t think you know how much it means to me, but I really am grateful.”

“We’re happy you let us stay,” Jimin murmured, tilting his head to the side.

“So!” Leah began loudly. “Aren’t you going to tell us about what happened when you came back here? And how do you know the king?”

The smile left Seokjin’s face. “You did miss the coronation,” he muttered, more to himself than them. “It makes sense that you do not know.”

“Of course,” he lifted his head. “I’ll tell you. But it’s not a very happy story.”

Yoongi returned after an hour or so, bowing gracefully before Seokjin. A few other servants scurried in, trays of food in hand. Seokjin caught sight of one familiar, and yet he ignored them. This one was not under his protection like the omegas. He could not acknowledge them yet. Instead he focused on the food. Seokjin could tell that Yoongi had not taken his request to be served leftovers seriously. The dishes were too fine and rich to have been left behind by others.

“These are similar to what was served at the coronation banquet this morning,” Yoongi informed him. “I hope they’re to your liking. Is there anything else you have to request?”

Seokjin glanced at the omegas. “Thank you, Lord Min. Tell Namjoon these servants will be serving me from now on. If he has a problem with it, then tell him this is the only wedding present from him I will accept.”

Yoongi jerked, looking at Seokjin with wide eyes. In the next moment, he narrowed them. “Lady Hae,” he hissed under his breath. “She’s told you.”

“Yes, thank the gods,” Seokjin sighed. “I mean, somebody had to. What, did you think you could

march me down the aisle without even a word of what was to come?”

Yoongi pinched the bridge of his nose, as if he could feel a headache coming on. “I wanted Namjoon to be the one to tell you. To ask you,” he corrected. “It didn’t seem right of me to break the news to you. Lady Hae had no business informing you of that.”

“Oh, really?” Seokjin scoffed. “I’m rather glad she warned me. If she didn’t who knows how I would have reacted to *Namjoon* of all people asking me. Besides, I might have guessed it eventually. You did put me in my mother’s old rooms.”

“That was Namjoon’s idea,” Yoongi reasoned. “He wanted to show the other nobles of your status so they wouldn’t try to bully you.”

“How sweet of him,” Seokjin remarked dryly. “But he should know I’m not the type to be bullied.”

He could feel Leah and Ru staring at him, then when they looked away. Those two had only a taste of Seokjin’s ruthlessness when he dealt with Ru’s attacker. Perhaps his coldness now still surprised them.

“I’ll take this as you agreeing then and tell Namjoon the good news,” Yoongi offered, rolling his eyes. He held his hand out, counting each finger. “We’ll need to order more things for the wedding, have the right clothes made and the people who were here today invited there as well. I think we can prepare all of it five weeks, maybe even less now that I’m around.”

“Do you have some secret skill as a party planner?” Seokjin asked, amused.

Yoongi sent him a look. “I’m good at managing things, better than my cousin. She won’t be in charge of this palace’s upkeep for much longer if I have any say.”

Seokjin put a hand to his chest. “Oh, Heavens! Has she not done what you wanted?”

Yoongi smiled unpleasantly. “Don’t you worry about that, Your Grace,” he refused to confirm or deny, which just confirmed it for Seokjin. Yoongi bowed.

“I’ll take my leave now and inform the king of your request,” he said.

“Yes, please do,” Seokjin sighed, as if a weight was lifted from his shoulders, as if Yoongi was doing him the utmost favor.

It’s his duty to listen to the blood of the Phoenix, Seokjin thought to himself. Yet he always makes it seem as if he’s doing it out of the kindness of his heart, pitying me.

“Lord Min is rather cold, isn’t he?” Leah mused once Yoongi had left, retreating along with the other servants he’d brought.

Seokjin smiled. “Only as cold as I,” he admitted. “Now come. Eat, all of you!”

His own stomach growled as he gathered food onto his plate, and the other omegas followed suit. Seokjin realized that they had never shared a meal together up until now. He’d always ate in the kitchens once he was done with work, or when he was allowed a break in his shift.

With Suran.

He frowned at the thought of his friend, who had come with Yoongi to bring in dishes. He’d wondered if it had been a test of Yoongi’s, to see if Seokjin recognized Suran, or if Suran herself

had snuck along in order to see him.

It was only later, when Jimin grabbed his hand and slipped a piece of paper inside, that Seokjin knew the answer.

Eyes everywhere. Know that I am on your side.

It was signed “Snoozy”, that ridiculous nickname that Suran had mentioned to him before he left. He crumpled it once he was done reading and held it over a candle in order to burn any of the evidence. Suran, who worked in the kitchens, who was now responsible for preparing several of the dishes they served to all of the Bangtan nobles. That same Suran was still on his side. Plans began to form in Seokjin’s mind, taking root and refusing to leave.

He thought of the banquet that had killed off the majority of his supporters, the imperialists all gone with a single sip of wine. Seokjin couldn’t help it.

He smiled.

Within the next week or so, a tailor came to measure Seokjin for his wedding garments. Seokjin, who had seen neither hide nor hair of his soon-to-be husband since, took it as Namjoon acknowledging Seokjin’s acceptance of his fate. It was sort of funny, if not sad, this wedding between two people who dare not speak to each other.

Seokjin had his friends measured for clothes as well, since it would not be fitting for the consort’s servants to wear the rags that they were used to. The omegas slept in a section of his rooms, close on hand if he needed them, on lavish pillows and blankets, and they ate better than they ever had as regular servants.

Since they deserved the best of the best, Seokjin would make sure that’s what they got.

As Seokjin stood, waiting for the tailor to finally put down his measuring tape and leave them, there was a knock on the door.

A wooden box was delivered to Seokjin. Ru took it from the messenger that brought it, dumping the box on top of his vanity rather unceremoniously. She squinted, examining the thing carefully.

“What do you reckon it is?” she asked.

“Jewelry,” Jimin offered. “It looks like a jewelry box to me.”

“Maybe some clothes?” Leah reckoned.

“We won’t know until we open it, will we?” Seokjin hummed. He shooed the tailor away and approached his vanity, hands sliding across the smooth wooden box. There was a small latch in the front, holding it shut. Seokjin flicked it up and opened the box.

It was dazzling, a circlet formed from glittering gold and dotted pearls, decorated with several swirling ornate designs, metal piled upon metal near the front, pulled open like a flower in bloom.

“A hairpiece?” Ru mused, in awe like the rest of them.

Seokjin picked it up, held it in his hands and turned it this way and that. A crown, he thought but did not say.

“Is there a note?” he asked faintly. “Or did the messenger say who sent it?”

Ru looked over the velvety inside of the box and made a noise in the back of her throat. “Aha!” she said triumphantly, lifting up a folded letter tucked underneath the black velvet cushion.

Jimin came over and pushed Seokjin in front of the mirror, fussing with his hair as he took the pretty hair piece and positioned it atop his head. He held his hand out and took the letter from Ru.

The first thing he noticed about it was the wax seal. Bright yellow wax, impressed with the outline of an animal, a mythical griffin poised as if it were readying for flight.

Jeon, he realized. This is the crest of Lord Jeon and his family.

Without further ado, he tore the seal and read what Lord Jeon had to say.

I must apologize for my actions. I fear that we have gotten off on the wrong foot. I offer you this gift, which I believe only one of your position can wear. Think of it as an olive branch, if you will. An expression of my sincere hopes for friendship.

- Lord Jeon.

Seokjin’s hands trembled, and he gave the letter back to Ru. “Put it back,” he murmured.

Seokjin glanced at himself in the mirror, staring at his pale face and the line that ran from his lower eyelid to the bottom of his jawline. He looked a little frightening wearing this elegant thing, which sparkled atop his head and almost seemed to transform him into some sort of cruel creature.

He felt a tightening in his gut and suddenly the walls were pressing in on him, the claws digging deep.

“An olive branch, huh,” Seokjin muttered.

Jimin shifted. “Do you want me to put it away?” he gestured to the gift.

“For now,” Seokjin agreed, narrowing his eyes. “I think I might wear it for my wedding.”

Yoongi visited him the next morning after breakfast.

“Good morning, Your Grace,” Lord Min greeted with a bow and smile. “Do you mind if you take a walk around the gardens with me? The weather has warmed up considerably. One of our gardeners has told me that they think the flowers will bloom any day now.”

Seokjin assessed him coolly. “Alright, Lord Min. Let’s walk.”

Once they left Seokjin’s rooms, Yoongi hooked his arm around Seokjin’s, giving any passerbys the impression of camaraderie.

“I didnt come just to admire the shrubbery with you,” Yoongi admitted in a low murmur, “but surely you realized that.”

“What do you want to tell me this time, Lord Min?” Seokjin hummed.

“Namjoon has told me the gist of what happened between you two.”

Seokjin frowned, something within him flaring in anger at the thought of Namjoon telling such a private thing to Yoongi. He only hoped that he’d spared the other omega the details. Then he chided himself for getting angry, because he’d given the bare bones of the story to his own friends,

too.

“And?”

“I won’t lie to you and tell you that this sort of outcome wasn’t in my plans. I’d wanted you to marry Namjoon from the very beginning. To find out that you two had fallen in love while I was away...well, it made me happier than you could even imagine,” Yoongi admitted.

“We didn’t fall in love,” Seokjin rejected that notion rather coolly. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Yoongi looked over at him. “You were at least lovers, yes? And now neither of you are talking to each other.”

“Are you going to try and tell me that we should kiss and make up?” Seokjin snorted.

“I’m just saying that you should play your cards right. Be on your best behavior and all that. Namjoon is already fulfilling his duty by marrying you as his imperial consort, his first mate. There’s no one telling him he can’t have more. In fact, I think a few of the others would encourage it,” Yoongi warned. He looked a little unnerved by his own words.

“Why are you telling me this?” Seokjin muttered. “Why should any of that matter to me?”

Even though he felt his omega hissing at him, crying out in anguish. *No, no, no! Our mate, he’s ours alone!*

Yoongi looked around, then lowered his voice as they continued to walk the length of the gardens, mindful of the servants they passed by who seemed to be paying them close attention.

“Hoseok told me that Namjoon has spoken to him about taking a concubine at least once before. That means he’s open to the idea of such a thing. I just want you to be careful. The game you’re playing is a little different than what you’re used to. To keep your status, you have to keep Namjoon’s affections.”

Seokjin’s jaw clenched, and he had to bite his tongue - literally - to stop the vile, angry words he was so very tempted to spew out. *Namjoon is mine!* He wanted to snap. *The only one he’s going to be biting or fucking or knotting is me!*

Perhaps Yoongi sensed Seokjin’s anger because he glanced over, clearing his throat. “It’s just a thought, though. There are no concrete plans. I just wanted to warn you not to make things difficult for yourself.”

“Thank you for the concern,” Seokjin said stiffly, pulling his arm away from Yoongi’s. He gave a curtsy, which was more mocking than anything. It reflected how Yoongi was treating him now, as if Seokjin was a child who needed to be chided and shown the way.

He left before Yoongi could get another word in edgewise, furious and discontent with the other omega’s warning, even if it had meant to serve as a helpful warning rather than a hurtful threat. Lady Hae had mentioned the possibility of Namjoon taking other mates, but Seokjin had not dwelled on it for long. Now here Yoongi was, repeating a similar line of thought.

Seokjin took a deep breath. He’d have to have precautions for if things came to that. He put a hand to his chest, massaging the center of the area which burned and soaked in a furious envy.

How strange it was, to deny yourself something in one breath and yet want to make it your own in

the next.

The scenery of the once vibrant mountainside was dull, the grass trampled beneath hundreds of feet and stained with the spray of blood. What had once been green turned an ugly grey, as if to match the dank, decaying bodies that made this field their grave.

Yerin wore a scarf in front of her mouth to guard her from not only the smell but the toxins. Her normally ornate golden hair lay limp on her shoulders, tucked to one side in a pathetic braid. She wore her least favorite clothes as she trudged through the mud, blood, and gore of the field and came to a stop a few feet away from her...friend.

Eunha was busy with her meal, and upon hearing Yerin's approach, she paused and raised her head. Her mouth, drenched in blood so stale it was nearly black, opened wide as she smiled, teeth gleaming in the darkness.

"Hello, Yerin," she purred. "What sort of news have you brought me today?"

"Nothing too great, I'm afraid," Yerin kept her composure. It was a miracle she did not lose her supper at the sight of the monster she had once called her friend. "Kim Seokjin is set to marry your king, Kim Namjoon."

"My king?" Eunha mocked. "Ha! That's an interesting way to put it! You mean my puppet? I owed his mother a life debt, nothing more, nothing less."

She leaned her head back down, probably content to swallow another soul or two, but Yerin called out once more.

"Aren't you worried?" the beta asked. "About what's going to happen if Seokjin conceives?"

Eunha rolled her eyes. "You always were a soft one for babies, weren't you, Yerin?" she scoffed. "Don't worry. Even if Kim Seokjin conceives, which he won't, then any child he bears won't draw breath. He's been using suppressants for far too long. Even you told me that."

Yerin shifted, uncomfortable. She thought of the omega as she had last seen him, smiling and laughing, so reminiscent of Sumi. Then she thought of her own infertility, of Sumi's son facing that very same painful thing.

"There's always a chance. If he bonds with Namjoon, a strong bond, then the odds go up. Even if they're compatible, there's a good chance," Yerin commented. "I don't think it would be fair to rule out the possibility."

Eunha smiled again, and this one seemed to be a warning. "If there's anything you should be worried about, Yerin, it should be where I'm going to get my next meal. I feasted so very well when the mad king was in charge. If things don't go as planned and I don't get my war then I might go through a famine!"

"I just don't understand why it's so important," Yerin insisted. "It's just a baby. Yet you were so worked up about it months ago, going on and on about the seed of madness or whatever."

Eunha narrowed her eyes and before Yerin could so much as blink, the witch was a mere foot in front of her, hand reaching out to wrap around Yerin's neck in a bruising embrace.

"Do you know why I cannot allow Kim Seokjin to bear a child?" Eunha hissed, squeezing Yerin's neck.

The beta sputtered and coughed, frantically clawing at her friend's hands with her nails, but nothing worked. Eunha's skin was like stone, unbothered despite her efforts. Yerin felt lightheaded, black spots appearing in her vision, and her hands fell to her side as the fight was drained from her.

Eunha, sensing that she was about to kill her, let go. Yerin fell to the ground, coughing as she tried to regain her breath.

"A seal," Eunha admitted faintly, twirling her wrist as the bones popped. She wiped at her mouth with the back of her hand, smearing blood down her chin. "A phoenix seal inside of his womb. One of my gods is sealed in there, too, and the voices are all clamoring, yelling at me. They don't want it to bear fruit."

Yerin heaved, looking up. "What sort of god?" she croaked.

Eunha met her gaze, her piercing silver eyes seeming to glow in the moonlight. Yerin's mouth twisted into a frown, yet she hardened her heart, not allowing any of her doubt to seep out and make itself known to her friend.

"The sort of god that put them to sleep in the first place."

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: RETURN OF THE TITTY BOOK

In all seriousness, yerin's origin story!(more in depth then the flashbacks we've seen before) And the contents of the little black book that belonged to jae are finally revealed (sort of).

also next chapter is primarily OC time and will be updated in a few hours.

we're moving along, one chapter at a time! YEEHAW...

if there are any mistakes, i'm sorry. i'll have time to edit later :)

come talk to me on [twitter](#) or [curiouscat](#)

please leave comments or kudos if you enjoyed!!

Nothing More Than Memories

Chapter Summary

Yerin revisits the past, both by dreaming and reading.

Chapter Notes

tw: miscarriage, rape & prostitution (these two are not written about in detail.)

ok so here is the second update to commemorate 1 year of "rising sun (my heart bleeds for you)"!

also if you want to listen to the OST that i had on repeat when i wrote the last part of this chapter then i have linked it when it comes to it. just look for the *

WILL EDIT LATER, FRIENDS WANT ME TO GO OUT AND I'M FINISHING THIS AT THE LAST SECOND UGH

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

In Yerin's dreams, she was young again. Young and beautiful. The merchant's daughter with the golden hair. Her mother was from overseas, a white woman with yellow hair and dull blue eyes. She'd met Yerin's father on one of his trips to the British Isles, but their story was not one of love. It was of necessity.

"He wanted silk," her mother recalled, accent thick and clumsy. "Silk, spices, and gold. I wanted freedom."

She held out her hands, shaking them a little for emphasis. There were black numbers tattooed there on her wrists, the mark of a prisoner.

"Blood everywhere," she crowed, making claws out of her hands. "They found me. Jailed me. Wanted to burn me at the stake. I would not stay and burn."

Yerin's mother was a witch, and she taught her daughter everything she knew. The only problem was that Yerin had not been born with an ounce of magic running through veins. The gift had passed over her, deemed her unworthy, and so Yerin was not a witch, though she wanted so very much to be one.

But she saw things. Yerin could see the invisible creatures of the night, fairies and pixies and even other witches who hid themselves from a normal human's eye. Her mother had joined a small coven of them, though she always stood on the outskirts of their gatherings, clutching Yerin close to her side. She'd been in the country for a little over ten years, yet still spoke little of its language.

Even if she did, Yerin did not think it would help much. Her mother would always be unwelcome, an outsider, a foreigner. The only time the other witches interacted with her was when they wanted something.

They treated Yerin much the same, but the young girl found that among the ordinary smallfolk, she faced little of this ostracization. The only thing foreign about her was her hair, which many found beautiful and rare rather than strange. Many of the neighbor girls would stop her on the street and pay her compliments, hoping to be friends with the rich merchant's pretty daughter.

Yerin ignored them for the most part. She had one friend and one friend only.

Eunha had been born in the winter, and her hair was as white as snow. She came from a long line of shamans and priestesses, her mother being one of the witches in the coven. Though she held no foreign blood, she'd come out with pale skin, white hair, and silver almond-shaped eyes.

Albino, the smallfolk whispered. *Cursed by the same gods her ancestors served.*

But the witches scorned these superstitions, heralding Eunha as the child of a prophecy, blessed with so much magic and potential. *The White Witch*, they called her. They believed she would one day bring magic back to the country as it had been once before, before the first Kim king had sealed it into place. She would be the one to bring magic thrumming through the roots of the trees and singing in the skies. It was Eunha who was destined to break the seal the first Kim king had laid down his life for.

Eunha was the only other child amongst the coven to speak to Yerin, who'd been scorned for years as a dud. She would brush her golden hair, tying it into a long braid, while Yerin would tell her the stories her mother brought over from the Isles.

They walked along the market, commenting on handsome alphas or pretty omegas they saw, and many of the commoners had taken to calling them the Little Sun and Little Moon.

They were just girls once, with silly hopes and dreams.

Yerin wanted to marry a kind alpha of similar standing, to take care of a litter or two of children. Her early childhood had been rather lonely, being an only child. Often times she wished her mother had given her siblings to play with, yet she was content with Eunha, who was more sister than friend.

Eunha had other dreams. She liked the quiet life away from the capitol, enjoyed her potions and runes and books. Eunha cared little about the great destiny that was foretold of her.

"I want to live alone," she sighed. "In a cottage in the woods far away. The only visitors I'll allow will be you and my parents. I won't let any of the other witches or priestesses come and tell me what to do."

When they turned fourteen, Eunha's parents announced that she would be betrothed to an arrogant alpha from some minor noble family. It was rumored he was a quarter faerie, and their union was "read in the stars" by his mother, a well-respected witch. How could Eunha's humble farming parents resist the wish of their lord?

"She's a liar!" Eunha had whispered harshly the night they had heard, crying together in Yerin's bed. "She just wants my magic. That's all they ever want!"

"I don't want to marry some noble...He'll probably lock me up inside some manor while he goes off and travels the world, mates as many other omegas as he likes! Yerin, I don't want to be neglected like that."

It was Yerin who pressed a bag of coins into Eunha's hand and urged her to take one of their horses. "Head for the mountains or the woods," she insisted. "Just make sure you're far enough

away from here. My mother can get you a charm so they can't track you. She never liked those old crones anyway!"

Many tears followed, with enough hugs and goodbyes to last a lifetime, before Yerin convinced Eunha to leave. They promised to write each other once things had calmed down, and even if it took a few memory spells of her own, Eunha was determined to come back and see Yerin.

"We're sisters. Fate won't keep us apart forever," Eunha promised, silver eyes almost glowing in the moonlight as she held one of Yerin's hands.

Yerin nodded, unable to speak due to the lump in her throat. All she managed to get out in the end was, "Sisters, yes. Take care, Eunha."

"And you, Yerin."

With that, her only friend, only comfort was gone.

It sent an uproar in the community to discover that Eunha was missing. Many of the witches blamed Yerin's mother, who merely spat in their faces and rolled her eyes. She was too old now to care for their foundless accusations.

"Eunha would have liked the Isles," was all her mother said on the matter. "Less nosey witches there."

Yerin smiled. That simple statement contained all of her mother's feelings on the matter. She supported Eunha's decision to leave, and she cared little for what the others thought of it. Her mother left the coven before she could be exiled. Her magic had been getting weaker as of late, which she claimed was a result of her distance from her homeland. It was only a matter of time, really.

Yerin later learned that the coven had fallen apart soon after Eunha disappeared. There were many who pointed fingers at Eunha's own parents, who were forced to move, and soon others fell away, too, disillusioned by the lack of central leadership and worried with the current laws against magic and the tightening of the seal. It was rumored those laws were responsible for the dud births that had befallen their crumbling coven, their instincts striving to protect their young by stripping them of any magical inheritance.

Some joined other covens, which then weakened as well, until there were only a few sects left in the entire country. It seemed very much like the magic bloodline would die out.

Yerin did not care very much about this, as magic had always been a tricky, dangerous thing to her growing up. Perhaps it was just time for it to leave this world.

It was six years later that Yerin received any word from her friend Eunha, and it came in the form of a letter. Eunha had revealed she fulfilled her dream: she lived up north, sequestered away in the woods in an abandoned cabin that she'd spruced up. The younger girl was content to spend her days perfecting all sorts of different spells and potions as she lived by herself.

It seemed that as everyone else's magic had withered, Eunha's magic thrived. She ranted and raved to Yerin, who had to chuckle upon reading her letters sometimes, completely lost as to what her friend was referring to. Though she couldn't understand the mechanics of magic, the letters held a special place in her heart, allowing bits and pieces of her friend's personality to shine through in Yerin's dreary life.

However Yerin no longer smiled whenever Eunha told her of the man she had met, a kind, handsome alpha who actually happened to own the land she'd made her home on. A noble. Pinpricks of jealous ran along Yerin's belly, reminding her of the fact that she had yet to meet any suitor who made her heart sing.

Her father had introduced her to several men around her age, but Yerin refused every courting gift offered to her. There was no one who sparked her interest, no one with the sort of personality or face that pleased her. Her mother had scoffed just yesterday when Yerin rejected another potential suitor, the beta son of another merchant family.

"You are far too picky!" her mother spat in English. "You will die alone if you continue on like this, a miserable old spinster!"

"I would rather die alone than die stuck in some loveless marriage like you!" Yerin yelled back, running off to her room so she might escape her mother's screams.

Yerin would not settle for less than the best, knowing how much her mother's lackluster arrangement had worn at her throughout the years. She'd made up her mind long ago that she would only marry someone fair, kind, and smart, and if they were not any of those things, then they at least had to love her forever.

It was perhaps remarkably childish, but Yerin had not seen the world for all of its cruelty yet. When she did, it would hit her face first, so fast and hard that she would never recover.

If it had not been for Princess Sumi, then she would have kept her ignorance. Of course, Yerin did not at first know it was the Crown Princess that she spoke to. The alpha had come dressed in clothes so much fancier than any Yerin had ever seen, catching the beta when she was out in the garden.

"Park Sarah?" the well-dressed alpha asked, pronunciation a little off. She was the most beautiful woman Yerin had ever seen, eyes a gentle brown and black hair soft as silk. She wore a loose, side braid, decorated with pastel flowers of all kinds, but her hanbok was in the typical style of a man's.

The alpha's face was soft, and her heart-shaped lips were a pretty pink. She smiled at Yerin encouragingly, tilting her head to the side as she waited for an answer.

Yerin blinked, closing her mouth which she knew must've been gaping, and stood. It was not often that they received unannounced visitors, especially ones as pretty as this. Of course Yerin would be shocked to see the alpha here. The beta wiped her hands on her skirts.

"Sarah," she corrected, clearing her throat and pretending that she wasn't awestruck by this alpha's beauty. "Yes, that's my mother. What business do you have with her?"

"My name is Sumi," the alpha said, bringing a hand to her chest as she gave a sweeping bow. "If you're not Sarah, then may I enquire what name belongs to such a beautiful girl?"

"Yerin," the beta stuttered out, feeling foolish as she curtsied at last. Her face was flushed, and she wanted very badly to duck it in a basin of ice water.

"Yerin," Sumi repeated, eyes soft. She gestured to the omega she'd brought with her, who Yerin had not noticed before. "This is Jae, my personal servant."

The boy ducked his head, green eyes daring to meet Yerin's own. He was dressed in clothes even fancier than Yerin, though Sumi proclaimed he was a servant. Yerin suddenly felt a little uncomfortable, knowing what was whispered about unmated omegas who served alphas.

“My mother,” Yerin began, uncertain. “You came for her? Why?”

“My lady has heard of your mother’s extraordinary gifts and hoped to make use of them. There is a urgent matter that requires...supernatural attention,” the servant Jae explained.

Yerin stared at them for a moment, narrowing her eyes. This was not the first time some fancy noble had made their way over, expecting her mother to hand them the world in exchange for a small sack of gold.

“Unfortunately, my mother is out. She’s on a retreat to a temple, and I can’t say when she’ll be back,” Yerin said truthfully, for her mother had left just yesterday morning.

Jae made a face, looking clearly irritated. “Thank you for your time. It seems like our journey here was in vain,” he bowed, then made to leave.

Sumi laughed and waved a hand. “Oh, hush now, Jae! It most certainly was not. Not when I have just met the most beautiful woman in this kingdom, aside from me of course!”

Yerin giggled. This girl’s confidence was not offputting as it perhaps should have been. Instead, the beta found herself endeared instantly. “Well, you certainly are confident, my lady! Do you say such things to all the girls you meet?”

Sumi’s face became solemn, and she rested her hand on her heart. “Only the pretty ones,” she promised, winking.

Sumi gave another bow and looked as if she made to leave, mouth opening to say her own goodbyes. Something in Yerin’s gut twisted. “Tea!” she blurted out. “Would you like to come in for some tea?”

She did not want this alpha to go. Not yet.

Sumi raised her head, stars in her eyes as she beamed and ducked her head. “How could I ever refuse?”

The alpha turned towards her companion and withdrew a pouch from her sleeves. “Go on without me, Jae,” she commanded. She flicked a few stray bangs away from her face for dramatic flair.

The omega rolled his eyes, clearly miffed, but did not put up a fuss and did as he was told. It seemed he knew where he stood with his master.

“Will he be alright on his own?” Yerin asked, a little worried. Unmated omegas did not walk alone around the marketplace. It just wasn’t done.

“Jae can protect himself,” Lady Sumi assured her. “He would not be my servant if he could not. Now, what sort of tea do you have to serve me?”

It could be said that Sumi came for Yerin’s mother, but stayed for Yerin herself. She visited at least once a week, calling on Yerin and speaking to her in their small garden or over tea.

Sumi was arrogant, but she had something to show for it, unlike any of the other alphas Yerin had been introduced to. They were all bark and no bite, boasting of their prowess and skill and yet faltering when asked for a demonstration. Sumi knew she was beautiful and spoke of it often, in funny way that always managed to draw a laugh from Yerin.

She never lacked for compliments either, always drowning Yerin in little praises and admiration.

“Your hair is so fine, so golden? How so?” the alpha asked one day, reaching out to curl her finger around a strand of Yerin’s hair.

“My mother is a Westerner, but surely you must know that,” Yerin reasoned. “Her name is Sarah, after all.”

“Her last name was Park,” Sumi shrugged. “I could not be too sure. I never like to make assumptions.”

Yerin took a deep breath, trying to summon some of her courage. “Neither do I. So I will only ask you this once. Why do you come back here? You have met my mother at least twice, but never asked for that favor you came for. Instead...you just talk about me.”

Sumi raised an eyebrow. “Surely you must know,” she repeated slyly, taking Yerin’s hands in her own. “I’ve been coming here for around four months now, haven’t I?”

Yerin flushed and started to jerk away her hands, embarrassed, but Sumi would not let go. Sumi’s expression softened, and the alpha relented.

“Fine, fine! I’ll say it. I like you, Park Yerin,” Sumi declared, cheeks slightly red.

Yerin smiled, feeling very pleased and warm, because it seemed like her feelings were returned. Yet she would not let Sumi get away so easily. “What do you like about me?” she insisted. Sumi let out a deep, exaggerated sigh as she slumped over, tugging at Yerin’s hands. “Oh, come on, Yerin!” she whined. “You’re not really going to make me say it, are you?”

Yerin tilted her head. “Yep!” she declared with relish. “I really am! I have to know what you like about me if I’m going to believe you!”

Sumi sighed and let go of Yerin’s hands, as if she were exhausted. Finally she straightened up and fixed her gaze on Yerin once more. “I like your eyes! They’re so bright and dazzling. It seems like they hold a million galaxies within them. I love your honey hair! And your skin, as soft as a peach.”

“Is that all?” Yerin asked, trying to not sound as disappointed as she felt. It was a little...less than she’d been expecting.

The alpha leaned forward. “Let me finish,” she whispered.

Her fingers came to press underneath Yerin’s eyes, barely brushing against her fluttering eyelashes. “Your eyes...you never fail to look at me...to stare me in the eyes. It is such a rare thing for me to find people who treat me as if I am an actual person. Right from the beginning, you always met my gaze, never once flinching from the alpha woman who’d come to your home when you were all alone.”

Sumi’s fingers moved, and she brushed them through the fine strands, curling a few around her index finger. “You say you do not like anyone to touch your hair, and yet when I whine and beg, you let me run a comb through it and braid it. You trust me to be kind to you.”

Yerin didn’t dare breathe as the fingers travelled down, pressing against the hollow of her throat, right up against the scent glands. Sumi’s eyes were dark and fierce. “Your skin is as soft as a peach. I wonder if it would bruise as easily, too?” the alpha mused.

A bead of sweat ran down Yerin’s neck.

“Would you trust me to be cruel to you, Park Yerin?” Sumi asked, voice nearly a growl.

Yerin surged forward, catching the alpha in a kiss, and it seemed her actions were answer enough for Sumi.

Yerin learned Sumi’s identity in a rather anticlimactic way. The alpha, after a few months of actual courting, simply revealed her very important lineage and status.

“I’m the Crown Princess,” Sumi confided, looking like she might be sick. “Kim Sumi. Please don’t be angry. I had meant to tell you sooner, but I did not know how to put it into words. Then I realized I should just come out and say it, so...I did.”

Yerin blinked. “You’re not...playing some prank on me, are you?”

She did not know how to take the news, as it seemed like something she might dream of, so out of this world and unreal. But Sumi shook her head slowly, forlorn and guilty as she removed the leather band around her left wrist.

A red and golden phoenix curled around her wrist, bright and hot to the touch, as Yerin found out when she ran a finger over the mark. She knew what it was, both as a commoner and a witch’s daughter.

The mark of the phoenix presented itself in every Kim, proof of one’s royal blood. To the commoner’s it was a sign of holiness, that their rulers had indeed been chosen by some divine force to lead their kingdom.

To the witches, it was salt in old wounds, a reminder of the sacrilegious act that the first Kim king had done hundreds and hundreds of years ago when he sealed away the main life force of all magic. Their gods. The first Kim king had his entire body covered in the marks before he died, signs of all the gods that he had locked away inside his harmless, human body. He sacrificed himself for the cause, and yet the weight of such a lofty burden - suppressing a god within oneself - would not just simply disappear.

The duty was passed on, one descendant at a time. Every Kim descended from the son of the first king would be born with the mark of the phoenix, the sealing of a god within their body. It was the reason for the infamous Kim madness, the short lives that so many of them led.

It was one thing to hear about the mark of the phoenix. Another to see it.

Yerin had to rub her eyes and pinch herself, for fear she was dreaming.

“Are you angry?” Sumi asked, eyes suspiciously dewy. “You haven’t said anything!”

Yerin shook her head, a little miffed. “It’s a lot to take in, ok? Give me a second. I’m just...collecting my thoughts!”

She put herself in Sumi’s position, the Crown Princess, the heir to the throne, and understood why she would have hid it. Her title was something that could land her in grave danger if the wrong people were told when she was on her excursions to the capital streets. Slowly, Yerin reached out her hand and wrapped it around Sumi’s. “It’s ok. This doesn’t change anything for me. You’re still the same old Sumi, right?”

Sumi sniffled, and she looked so very relieved. “Right!” she insisted. “It shouldn’t change anything. I promise!”

How foolish Yerin was to believe something like that.

Sumi's father had been bedridden for nearly a decade. Everyone knew that the only thing that kept him tethered to this world was his undying devotion for his Imperial Consort, who would be heartbroken and shattered if he left him.

One afternoon when Yerin was showing Sumi the flowers she had planted in the garden, Jae came with news for Sumi. The omega's face was ashen, his green eyes dull and red-rimmed.

"Sumi," his voice cracked. "Something's happened."

Sumi stilled and looked up at Jae, slowly retracting her hand from the flower whose petals she'd been stroking. "You don't need to say it," she told him softly. "I already know. I feel it. He's gone."

Yerin blinked and tugged at Sumi's arm. "Sumi," she murmured. "What's going on?"

Jae fixed Yerin with a look. The omega had never been afraid to show his distaste for her, and Yerin herself had even overheard him trying to convince Sumi to break things off with her, but all of his efforts were in vain.

"The king has died!" Jae declared, narrowing his eyes. "Sumi has to go back to the palace now. Quickly. Before Hyunseok thinks he can make his move."

Sumi stood, with Yerin following, but the alpha shook her head at her. She removed Yerin's hand from her arm gently. "Yerin, please. I have to go now."

"Are you leaving?" Yerin breathed. "For good this time."

Sumi stared at her, pushing a stray strand of blonde hair behind Yerin's ear. "For a while," she admitted guiltily. "I hate to leave you like this, but there's things I must do. Responsibilities I'll have to tend to now. It will be after the mourning period, for sure, but..."

"Sumi," Jae said, a warning.

Sumi grabbed Yerin's hands, giving a kiss to each one. "I will send for you," she promised. "Please, just wait for me! I'll have you by my side as soon as it's allowed. As soon as it's safe! Just be patient and trust me, ok?"

Yerin felt like she might be sick, but she nodded and agreed. It was the only thing she could do. Sumi was a princess, the Crown Princess, she had duties that Yerin could not even understand.

The thunderclouds that had gathered in the sky above rumbled, and just as it began to sprinkle, Sumi left her.

Yerin waited.

Except Sumi did not send for her.

Not after a few weeks, not after a month.

It seemed like a thousand years had passed since Yerin last saw her beloved, a thousand years of suffering and pain, and yet all of it was swept away once she did not bleed. A doctor whispered the news to her with a grim, ashy face, and Yerin's father gave him money to keep him quiet.

Yerin was pregnant, set to bear her family's greatest shame, a bastard.

And she learned, from the rumors of the street, that Sumi was getting married.

Is this the duty she spoke of? Yerin thought bitterly. Leaving me like this?

She tried not to think about the alpha, tried to erase her from her thoughts completely, but it was hard when she felt her belly grow more and more each day, proof of the fleeting love they had shared.

Yerin came home one day from the market and realized that her mother had visitors, their shoes at the entrance of their house and their cloaks and jackets hung up to dry. It had been raining more often than not these days, which some whispered was the gods' doing, their grief at the loss of such a great king.

She recognized a few of them, two pairs of shoes and two of the cloaks, which belonged to Sumi and Jae. Yerin held her breath, and for the first time in a long time, she allowed herself to hope that Sumi had not forgotten her.

Yerin's parents did not know of whose child it was she carried, as they had always been outside of the house when Sumi came to visit. They were both betas, too, so neither of them could smell an alpha's scent, let alone pick Sumi's apart from the rest.

Yerin took off her raincoat and looked around, finding that Sumi's group was holed away in her mother's room, the one she used for business purposes. Yerin went inside the one next over, where she knew a small hole between the two rooms would allow her to listen in and look. She had to crouch and climb under a desk in order to do so, but Yerin thought it was worth it to know what they were saying.

"Do you know what kind of curse this is?" she heard her mother ask slowly, sternly, which threw away any of Yerin's hopes that Sumi might be there for her. She remembered "To stop the creation of life is a dark thing. It goes against nature. This will require a price, perhaps an exchange that you cannot pay by yourself."

Sumi straightened her shoulders. "I can pay it," she declared, though her voice trembled. Jae put his hand on her arm, squeezing it.

Yerin's nose flared at the movement, feeling something possessive claw at her insides. Why did Jae touch Sumi so casually? Had Yerin been anything besides of a beta, she knew Sumi would surely reek of her, chasing off any potential suitors. For the hundredth time, Yerin lamented her beta nature.

Her mother stared at the fire for a while, hunching her shoulders in silence. She looked so very small in that moment. "The spell is too complex," the witch admitted. "Even if I was at full strength, it would take more than I could ever offer. But there is someone I know, someone that might be able to help you. Her name is - "

"What are you doing there?" Yerin's father asked, raising an eyebrow.

His sudden appearance surprised Yerin so greatly that she jumped, head flying up to hit the top of the desk she'd been crouched under. The beta cursed, clutching at the bump that was surely forming on her head. "Nothing!" she lied, voice too high to be believed.

Her father merely gave her a look, unimpressed. "Don't spy on your mother when she's doing a business deal. It's not proper," he chastised.

"I won't," Yerin swore, ducking her head. "Well, never again! I swear!"

Her father shook his head. "Wash up for supper, won't you? We're entertaining a noble from the Paek Clan."

She resolved herself to ask her mother or Sumi what it was that had been asked for, but the alpha must have left during supper, for Yerin saw neither hide nor hair of her that night. Her mother never left her study either, not even to go to bed or sleep.

Yerin tried to ignore how awful that made her feel, that Sumi would come all the way out to her house and yet not even see her. She barely paid attention when her father called her name at the dinner table.

"Yerin!" he insisted impatiently.

Yerin jolted impatiently. "Yes, Father?"

Her father raised his wineglass to the noble in front of him, a beta with salt-and-pepper hair and a mustache. "I was just telling Lord Paek all about your studies," he said. "You've been getting along rather well. All of your teachers have praises for you."

Yerin ducked her head. "I just study a lot," she admitted, pretending to be bashful. Really, she didn't give a shit. She just wanted this creepy old guy to leave.

But her father was doing a business deal of his own, and so she had to be on her best behavior.

When Lord Paek glanced at her, the look in his eyes made her shiver. His mustache quivered as he smiled. "Yes," he drawled. "It seems like you have quite the daughter! Beautiful and smart! My, how unlucky I am that I'm already married."

How lucky I am that you are, Yerin thought, stabbing at her meat with her fork. She trusted that her father would not trade her away to this man in order to be a sixth or seventh concubine. Not as long as her mother lived at least.

Besides Paek's creepy stares, something else made Yerin feel wrong. There was something in the air that made her arms itch, as if something terrible would happen or had happened. She played her part well, bidding Paek goodnight and readying for bed, but she was restless all night, barely getting a wink of sleep. When she woke in the morning, it was to a nightmare.

She would never get to ask her mother about the deal that was made, for the woman had died that very night.

Sumi, she thought frantically, crying in her father's arms beside her mother's corpse. What's going on? What have you made my mother do, that it would cost her life?

But Sumi did not come back to their estate, and all of Yerin's letters went unanswered. Yerin would have spent the next week doing nothing but crying, if not for the baby. She knew constant stress and tears would not do it any good. So she resigned herself to a quiet, steaming hatred. She hated Sumi for leaving, for asking her mother to use her magic. She hated her mother for dying. Somehow she hated herself the most, though, for even dreaming there could be a future for her and a princess.

No one knew of the pregnancy besides her father and the doctor she'd paid off. Her father tried to slip her a special tea to make her miscarry at the funeral, but Yerin threw it back in his face, furious. She knew what cheap abortives smelled like, what color they made the tea. She was the daughter of a witch, even though that witch was now dead, and not an idiot like her father thought.

"I can't believe you!" she cried, holding her hand to her belly, which was only a small bump at the

moment. “Now of all times?”

There were several guests milling about in the other rooms, all coming to pay their respects, and Yerin’s outburst drew the attention of one. A knock on the door and then Lord Paek was poking his nose into their business.

“Mister Park, Miss Park? Is something the matter?” his eyes zeroed in on her father, whose face was now not only red from the hot tea, but his rage.

“My daughter is being a little difficult,” her father admitted, clenching his fists. “Nothing I can’t fix.”

“Oh, Mister Park, please!” Lord Paek waved his hands. “There’s no need for this! I told you I would accept Yerin as she was!”

“What?” Yerin asked, standing stock still. She turned her face toward Paek, gaping at the older man. She could not comprehend, would not dare to understand the sort of thing they were discussing.

Paek came before her, kneeling as he took the hand from her belly and placed it on his own heart. Yerin trembled, wanting to kick him away before he could begin his tirade, but she did not.

“I have asked your father for your hand. I knew about the baby, but I wanted you anyway. I had not wanted to ask now, since I know you have just lost your mother. Your father has been insistent, however, and I thought to ask tomorrow perhaps, but! I cannot keep my passion for you hidden any longer, and I don’t want you to think I conspired against your child. I want to care for you both, you and the baby,” he ranted, looking quite pleased with himself at the end of it all.

Yerin jerked her hand away and shook her head. “No, there’s no way I can do something like that!”

Paek’s wrinkling face fell, and her father let out an angry growl, lurching for her, but Yerin sidestepped him. “I’m sorry. I...I have to go!” she said, fleeing the house.

It was pouring outside, pellets of rain almost bruising her skin as they hit her. She ran and ran, not quite knowing where she was going until she got there. Her curls were soaked, lying limp down her back, and her skin wrinkled like a prune from the rain. Her white hanbok was splattered with grey mud and she felt the stuff clog her shoes. Yerin stood in front of the palace gates and called out for the only person who might be able to help her.

“Jae!” she screamed. “Please, someone get me the omega servant Jae! I need to speak with him!”

The guards who were standing watch snorted and chuckled amongst themselves, and Yerin knew that her visit had all been in vain. They turned away from the sad sight of her after a minute or so, and she even saw one of them leave. Yerin sunk to her knees, tired and distraught. So much had happened to her these last few days.

She was pregnant and alone, her mother gone, her father trying to marry her off to the first rich old man that asked. The rain continued to come down and Yerin buried her face in her hands. After what seemed like an eternity, she heard a creak, wood groaning, and a familiar voice call out to her.

“Yerin,” Jae asked, holding an umbrella in his hands. He did not offer it to her, just stood and watched her pathetic, soaked form. His lips twitched, and Yerin knew he was probably laughing. “What brings you here?”

Yerin stood on shaky legs, moving forward slowly. “Please!” she pleaded. “I have to speak with Sumi! Just let me see her!”

Jae stared at her. “I’m afraid I can’t do that. The queen is a very busy woman. She can’t just come out to speak to every poor commoner that requests an audience. She has other things on her mind now.”

Jae turned, as if to leave.

“Please!” Yerin screamed, reaching out to tug at the sleeve of Jae’s fine hanbok. The omega jerked away, looking quite disgusted. “Please, I’m pregnant.”

The omega’s face paled, expression closing off. “Pregnant?” he repeated, murmuring the word like it was some sort of curse. “No. That’s...that is *not* good.”

Yerin sniffled, hand on her stomach. “Tell her that I need to see her, if only for a moment.”

Jae shook his head. “I *can’t* do that, Yerin. You have to understand. No one can know that you’re pregnant. I think it would be better if you just leave.”

Yerin took a deep breath, lifting her chin. “No!” she declared, voice trembling despite her best efforts. “I won’t leave until you let me see her!”

Jae’s face twisted into something nasty, his green eyes dark and piercing.

“Leave!” the omega snarled, pushing her away. “Unless you want me to put a noose around that neck of yours! Leave and never come back here!”

Yerin, who fell to the ground on her side, let out a whine, clutching her hip with muddy hands. Jae turned and before Yerin could even stand to stop him, the gates closed behind him with a creak. Yerin wailed, for Sumi’s dismissal, for her mother, for the baby in her belly.

She sat there, tears mixing in with the rain, shivering, until Lord Paek came to find her. He held his own umbrella out over her, clicking his tongue. “Oh, my dear!” he sighed, reaching out his hand. “Come back with me and we’ll get you warmed up. This weather can’t be good for the baby!”

Young, foolish Yerin looked at him, sneezed and then slowly took his hand, unaware that she was making a deal with the devil.

Paek seemed to have several houses within the capital, which boasted to Yerin’s father of his great wealth. He took Yerin to just one of them, and the servants fussed over her, hurrying to take her out of her wet clothes and put her in new ones, sitting her by the fireplace so that she might warm.

He told her that he and her father had already gone over the paperwork. She was his now. The news did not hurt Yerin as it should have. She was too numb for something like that.

“I offered your father a lot of money for you,” Paek told her. “Forgive him for almost hurting your child. It was enough money to make him go crazy, I fear. Money that he needs, now that your mother is gone.”

Yerin allowed herself to think on her mother, on just why it was her father married her in the first place. “Gold and spices and silk,” she murmured to herself. All of it had been conjured by her mother’s magic, and now that her mother’s magic was gone? So too were the things she’d summoned.

“I’ll allow you to rest and have the baby here,” Paek informed her. “But you must understand, I don’t expect for you to keep it. You will be my woman when all is said and done.”

Yerin, who had had the fight taken out of her by Jae’s words, only meekly agreed. In reality, she thought of running away once the baby was born, taking her baby with her. She would sooner die than be separated from the child, so deep was her love already.

She rested for a month in that house, passing her days in calm melancholy. Eventually, the need to run away was taken from her. She felt a sharp pain in her stomach, a swirling awful pain that would not go away.

“No, no, no, no!” she cried, hands cradling her bump as she felt the blood start to run down her thighs. She could not lose this baby, the last and only gift that Sumi had given her.

And yet lose it she did.

Yerin would’ve seen a doctor to find out what had caused the miscarriage this late, if not for the scandal she would then face. She’d been so far along that she’d thought she was safe from that sort of thing. So why had her son - because she knew it was a boy, how could she not? - been taken from her?

Paek came to her on the day that it happened, stumbling upon her lonely form as she ran her hands through the blood and tissue helplessly, as if searching for any sign of her son. He pinched the bridge of his nose and called for the maid, who helped Yerin clean herself.

“Worthless,” he murmured. “What a waste of my time. I thought you would have been safe from that curse!”

The remains were put into a opaque glass container of sorts, and Yerin begged Paek to let her bury her son. With the loss of her child, Paek turned cold. Yerin realized that he had never truly wanted her, just the babe in her belly.

He waved his hand. “Do whatever you want. I don’t care anymore.”

Yerin took her son back to her house, which she found her father had sold to someone else. In the dark of the night she buried him in the gardens, right where he’d met Sumi that one spring morning. She’d planted the seed of a flower on top, remembering her mother’s superstitions and hoping that her baby’s soul might attach itself and grow, if not as a human then as a flower.

She came back to Paek and asked in a calm, albeit hollow voice, “What sort of curse are you talking about?”

Paek smiled, a nasty, hideous thing. “The sort of curse that killed your child. Your beloved Sumi paid quite the coin for it.”

Yerin nearly fainted. “She knew?” she whispered, holding onto the desk so that she would not lose her balance.

Paek did not answer her. He merely leaned forward and repeated the wish that Sumi had made, “There will be no children born outside of Kim Sumi and Kim Hyunseok’s marriage bed.”

“Poof,” he gestured with his hands. “No more bastards. Only trueborn sons and daughters.”

His words were muted to Yerin’s ears. She heard and comprehended them, but it was a process. It took her a minute or so, gears in her head clogged with despair.

"I'll protect any child of mine no matter," Sumi had promised her once, eyes looking so far away in that moment.

What a fool, what a stupid, dumb fool. Why did Yerin ever think that she was imagining a future for them? That she'd been thinking of their children in that moment? How could she even dare to hope for that, when Sumi had thrown away their own child's life in exchange for the protection of her trueborn children.

"What am I supposed to do now?" she whimpered helplessly.

Paek rose, coming over to plant a hand on her shoulder. His eyes were soft as if he pitied her, as if he really cared about her suffering. "Don't worry, Yerin," he assured her. "I have just the place for a woman of your standing and gifts."

And he brought her to his brothel.

After weeks of training, Paek's brand seared across her back, an ugly, burning sensation. The rag in her mouth was soaked with spit, and she nearly bit through it because of the pain. Paek shushed her whimpers. "You'll be the rising sun, Yerin," he murmured, pressing a kiss to her raw, twisted skin. "The star of my establishment. They'll all love you."

They did.

It was easy for Yerin to lose herself, in the pretty clothes and jewelry, the spices and perfumes. She entertained Paek once or twice a month, as he told her it was the only price he required of her for saving her life. She forgot all about her child for the first month or so performing, all about Sumi's betrayal.

Yet a familiar face showed itself at her brothel one day, asking for Lord Paek.

Some of the other girls laughed, telling Yerin all about the sad, pregnant omega with green eyes who'd come calling for his alpha here. Yerin did not smile. Not yet. "Has he said his name?" she inquired, fixing her elaborate curls in place with her grandmother's jade comb.

"Jae," one of omegas in training told her. "His name is Jae, and he wants to see Lord Paek."

Yerin allowed a mocking laugh to escape her, a cruel sort of victory at the thought of Jae with a swollen belly and sad look in his eyes, coming all the way out to the gisaeng house to see his lover.

"Let me talk to him," Yerin told the omega. "I know who he is."

She rose, gathering her elaborate skirts and made her way down. Yerin knew the instant that Jae's piercing eyes caught on her, and she turned, raising an eyebrow. She rested a hand on the stairway. The other hand went to her heart. "My, my, my," she sighed. "Why, if it isn't Jae?"

"Yerin," he gasped. The omega glanced down to her stomach and paled.

Yerin wondered what he was thinking in that little brain of his. She finished her descent down the stairs. "When I heard there was a pitiful omega begging for an audience with his lover, I can't say I expected it to be you. You were always so proud, Jae! What happened?"

Jae's lips twisted into a frown. He looked around and leaned forward. "Can we speak somewhere else?" he murmured.

Yerin waved her hand, smirking. "Of course! Anything for an old friend!"

She guided the omega to a private room to listen to his plight. The omega asked her first if Paek could be found here, then explained that he had not seen the other man for weeks. "I think he's avoiding me," Jae sighed.

"Probably," Yerin shrugged her shoulders, pouring herself another cup of wine. "Paek has many mistresses stashed away inside this capital, let alone all over the country. You won't find him if he doesn't want to be found. He's probably with someone else right now."

Jae's frown deepened and he placed a hand on his swollen belly. He looked like he was ready to pop, and when he told Yerin he was due any day now, she realized he was. For some reason, Yerin wanted very badly to kick his stomach. *How dare he have a child?* She thought. *When he and Sumi stole my only one?*

She'd visited a doctor before beginning her work in Paek's brothel, and he'd only confirmed her worst fears. Yerin would never conceive again. He said that her insides had been burned by some sort of dark magic, scarred so deeply that it would be impossible to host life within her.

It seemed everyone was getting their happy ending except for Yerin.

"I won't be able to keep this child," Jae admitted quietly. "The queen was very upset when I told her who the father was and Paek can't acknowledge the child. His wife won't allow it. But Paek...he told me, he promised that he would at least give my baby to a noble family! That it was the least he could do! I'd hoped I could ask him who, but he's been avoiding me!"

Yerin's face twisted into something nasty. "Yes, well for your baby's sake, I hope that is so."

Jae furrowed his brow, but Yerin did not elaborate. The beta had begun to understand Paek's cruel, crafty nature, and she had found herself wondering these last few weeks, what Paek would have done with her child, knowing it was Sumi's.

Jae seemed enamored with Adviser Paek, if the stares filled with longing and the blissful sighs were anything to go by. Yerin couldn't help but snort. She wondered how someone could be that close to someone, and yet not know their true nature? Then she scolded herself, because she too had been blind to Sumi's true face.

Yerin could not help but ask. "How is she?"

Jae knew who it was that she referred to. His face twisted into something almost guilty. "Not good. She's been sick lately. The pregnancy hasn't been very good for her health, but she's due in another month so..."

How strange was it, that Yerin yearned for her still, that she felt awful thinking about her being sick?

"I see," Yerin murmured. She raised her cup of wine in the air. "Here's to Queen Sumi, that her child be an alpha male, the perfect trueborn heir to the Kim dynasty!"

Jae stared at her, features softening. "What happened?" he asked, nodding his head to her stomach. "To the baby?"

Yerin slammed her cup down, liquid sloshing out, and she narrowed her eyes, scoffing. "Oh, please! Don't play dumb, Jae. It doesn't suit you."

Jae took a deep breath. "So the curse...?"

Yerin smiled unpleasantly at him. “Worked perfectly!” she sneered. “Be sure to tell Sumi that! I’d hate for her to think she was cheated out of her coin.”

A clock chimed, and the gisaeng stood, smoothing her skirts. “Well, I’m sorry to disappoint, but it seems I just have to leave. I have customers to entertain.”

Jae grabbed her hand before she could leave, pleading, “You’ll tell Paek that I came, won’t you?”

Yerin scoffed and jerked her hand away. “As if!” she snarled. “I owe you nothing, Jae. Are you so entitled and spoiled that you cannot understand that?”

She left without another word and assumed that was that. Except it wasn’t. Perhaps Yerin should have threatened Jae not to come back, like the omega had done to her all those months ago, because Jae did come back. This time when Paek was there.

Yerin overheard them talking through one of the screens, talking about her.

“You did not tell me Yerin lost the baby,” Jae said, almost accusingly.

Paek snorted. “Please! You expected it, didn’t you? You told me you worried the curse would work on her too!”

A pause of silence and then. “How far along was she? When it happened?”

“Seven months,” Paek said carefully.

“Seven months?” Jae squawked. “Are you serious? That’s not a miscarriage, that’s a...an early birth, a stillbirth.”

“No, you do not understand...there was no body, no fetus...it looked like a miscarriage...it was just tissue. Red tissue.”

Jae gasped and it sounded like he was sniffing. “Stop! I don’t want to hear any of that!”

Paek murmured, “You said Sumi was only two months when she had the ceremony done? Then perhaps things were for the best. If Yerin had her child, if she produced a son, an alpha...it would just put Sumi in a worse position than she was.”

Another pause. “Why is she one of your gisaengs now? What am I supposed to tell Sumi?”

“Tell her the truth. It’s the only thing that would set her free, that would let her focus on her work.”

“It would crush her,” Jae refused. “I wouldn’t dare...not now, when she has so much to worry about.”

“Then later,” Paek suggested. “After the baby is born.”

More silence, then finally. “Until the baby is born,” Jae agreed.

Yerin’s chest ached. Did they mean that Sumi would still care about her, if even a little bit? Yerin wiped away the stray tear she felt down her face and left before she could hear anymore news of the alpha she had loved.

In two weeks’ time, Paek handed her a bundle.

Yerin signed the certificate with a shaky hand, documenting the exchange of sale as she cradled the baby. He made fussy sounds and reached for her chest with chubby fists. Yerin smiled down at him, but the smile died as she saw the signature next to her own on the certificate. She wondered if Paek had somehow disguised this as an adoption certificate, if that's why Jae's signature was on it.

She held Jae's son in her hands and named him Jimin. Park Jimin, as if he were her own.

For some reason it did not feel like much of a victory.

In a month, the bells tolled and the announcement was heard throughout the country.

Queen Sumi had given birth to a son of her own.

The shamans who examined the babe declared him an alpha, and even more celebrations began at the news.

Yerin held Jimin in her arms, rocking him as he nursed and singing a soft lullaby to try and drown out the fireworks and merrymaking outside. She looked out her window up at the moon and wondered if Sumi was holding her own son in her arms, her precious Seokjin.

She closed her eyes and couldn't help but wish they were together again, just once more.

For four years, Yerin knew peace. She rose in ranks among the other gisaengs, eventually training under the madam and Jimin grew day by day. His cheeks filling out, chubby and cute, and his hair growing into dark curls atop his head.

Yerin became content once more with her life, yet of course that had to shatter.

One of the girls told her she had a visitor one day, a strange looking woman who insisted that she see Yerin right away. Yerin approached hesitantly, unsure as to who was requesting her presence. She had had a few jealous mates come to her in the past, angry that she had slept with their husbands or wives.

This woman was not here for something like that.

Yerin gasped at the sight of her, name rolling off of her tongue and bringing so many memories to life. "Eunha!" she cried, running at the other woman and throwing her arms around her.

The white-haired woman laughed, accepting her hug and twirling Yerin around in her arms. "Oh, Yerin! It's so good to see you!"

She set the beta down with a huff. "You stopped answering my letters. I had to use my magic to find you."

"Sorry, sorry," Yerin apologized, ducking her head. For the last few years, she had no time to think about Eunha. There was Sumi and Paek, her lost baby and then Jimin, the girls in the gisaeng house to take care of. Yerin couldn't afford to dwell on the past, or else she would get lost in it.

Eunha frowned suddenly, hands tightening on Yerin's arms. "I'm sorry," she murmured. "About your mother. And your father, too."

"My father?" Yerin asked, brow furrowing.

Eunha grimaced and informed her that when she had looked for Yerin's father, she had found

nothing but a grave, right beside her mother's. He'd drunk himself to death soon after giving her to Paek.

"Ah," Yerin said, nodding her head. "Oh, well. Serves him right. He's part of the reason I'm here, you could say."

"Oh, Yerin," Eunha murmured. "Do you want me to take you away from here? I can, if you want it? A few memory spells here and there will do the trick."

Yerin pushed her away, shaking her head. "No, thank you," she said softly. "I'm afraid that I can no longer run away from this place. It's become my home."

Yerin straightened her shoulders, trying to lighten the mood a little with her next words. "Enough about me! What about you? Have you started a business selling potions yet?"

Eunha smiled. "Not quite. We are in the capital for work, though!"

Yerin frowned. "We?"

Eunha snapped her fingers. "Oh my! I can't believe I forgot to introduce the two of you!"

The next thing Yerin knew, Eunha was reaching behind her, pulling forth a small boy with a mop of white hair.

"This is Yoongi," Eunha declared, holding the boy out in front of her. There was a challenge in her eyes, as if she were daring Yerin to disapprove. "My son!"

Yerin blinked. She crouched down and met the boy's wild eyes. "Hello, Yoongi," she greeted him. "I'm Yerin, your mother's oldest friend."

The boy made a sort of hissing sound and hid his face in his mother's skirts, ducking away from her. Yerin couldn't help but smile. "Well, he's not very sociable, is he?"

Eunha narrowed his eyes. "He doesn't see a lot of people. It's to be expected. All of this newness, the smells and crowds of the capital...they've upset him."

"I take it you're not staying for long, then?" Yerin chuckled.

"No," Eunha sounded a little regretful. "I hope to be in and out of the palace in a weeks' time!"

Yerin froze. "The palace?" she asked carefully.

She had heard nothing but bad things about the palace as of late, of the king ranting at servants and burning them alive for the slightest disobedience. She knew that Sumi was bedridden, powerless to curb her husband's temper, and things looked like they were taking a turn for the worse. There were whispers about coups, about overthrowing King Hyunseok and placing another Kim on the throne, perhaps one from the other branch, which seemed unaffected by the madness of the Kims so far.

Yerin couldn't help but think of Sumi and how the throne should have gone to her, wonder why it didn't.

"The king has a job for me," Eunha declared. "It shouldn't take very long. It's supposed to be just a simple charm here and there. Lord Min was the one who recommended me for the job and brought us here. He's waiting outside with the carriage if you'd like to meet him."

Yerin fixed her with a look. “Is Lord Min the same lord that - “

Eunha’s cheeks turned pink and she said, a little embarrassed. “He’s Yoongi’s father, yes, before you ask.”

Yerin nodded. “Well, as long as you’re happy, I’m happy,” she told Eunha. But she felt as if things were much different now, as if Eunha had changed in a way she couldn’t comprehend.

“Would you like to meet him?” Eunha fiddled with her handkerchief.

Yerin shook her head. “I wish I could, but I’m rather busy here. Maybe you can come see me when you leave? That way I won’t feel like I’m keeping you from your work, either.”

Eunha frowned, but eventually gave a curt nod. “Alright,” she allowed. “I’ll see you in a week, then?”

But Yerin did not see her in a week.

The rumors took the capital by storm. The king was mad, he’d taken a witch to bed, forced her to be his bed servant, and each and every night, she screamed trying to break the chains that kept her a prisoner in the palace.

Yerin understood what had happened, so she called in a favor.

“Adviser Paek,” she greeted the man by his new title once he came to the gisaeng house. “I’m hoping you might help me set my friend free.”

It took months for the plan to be implemented, for all of their careful planning and scheming to pay off. In the end, the Eunha that they rescued from the palace was changed, a broken girl with dull brown hair, not a fleck of life or magic of her own left in her eyes.

She brought her back to the brothel and listened to her story.

They killed Eunha’s firstborn. Shattered his skull against the floor.

“Lord Min himself told me so,” she cried. “And I can’t even...even feel his soul anymore. All of my powers have left me.”

Yerin cradled her friend as she cried, held her beaten, bruised body in her arms. “He took Yoongi from me, said he was going to show him the stables, the horses, but then...” a sob cut her off, and she buried her face in her hands.

“He let them take my son. He handed me over as if I were a sheep to the slaughter, and then,” Eunha did not dare finish.

Yerin shushed her and told her there was no need. She understood. Yet Eunha would not let what had happened to her fade into the background, disappear from history.

There had been no small favor for her to perform. The whole reason that Eunha was brought to the palace was so that the king might get her with child.

“A child with me...he said that if he could create a Kim with the strongest witch alive, then that child’s blood might have enough magic to strengthen the seal. It was already weakening, cracking beneath the palace, splitting open Ancestor Kim’s tomb.”

“What are you talking about? No, no! I don’t understand. That doesn’t make any sense. Why was it weakening before you got there?” Yerin asked, confused. The prophecy the witches had spoken of...it involved Eunha breaking the seal. Not the seal cracking on its own.

“The only way I could have ever broken that seal was if the Kim king at that time - the mad king - broke the promise that his ancestors made first.”

“What was the promise?”

“Only the Kims of the main bloodline, the Kims with a phoenix emblazoned somewhere on their skin can sit the throne,” Eunha tugged on Yerin’s arm. “It’s why he’s so crazy. The throne has driven him mad, literally. He’s not of the main bloodline. He shouldn’t sit there.”

Yerin’s head was reeling from all of her friends information, which just piled on and on.

Eunha confided that she had become tired of all the king’s “visits”, had hoped that if she got pregnant he might go away, and so she’d reached out and broken the curse that had been cast, but only for a moment.

To break a witch’s curse, Yerin knew what it required. A burst of magic so great and powerful, belonging to none other than the witch who had cast it. That burst which had broken the Kim Ancestor’s seal, and fulfilled the witches’ prophecy, but only partially.

Eunha started to blubber out words, finally confessing that it had been her four years ago who cast Sumi’s curse. Only she could undo it. So she did, very briefly, and before she knew it, she was pregnant, seven months along. “Magic is strange,” she cried. “It grew like a tumor, so quickly...I don’t even understand it!”

With the seal broken, the magic did not return as it should have. Instead all of it went inside of Eunha’s broken, bleeding body - the very first host that it could find - and changed her completely. The gods she kept chained within her body drained her so much that it was exhausting just to breathe. She had so much magic that there was too much of it, every bit of power used just to sustain her life force. She could not use it as she once had.

Yerin thought it was a miracle her friend was still alive, did not understand how she could have survived so long, how she could even make it so far as to give birth to Taehyung, and yet he was a special golden thing, untouchable by all the evils of the world.

Yerin expected Eunha to disintegrate, to fade to dust and blow away with the wind. And perhaps she would do just that. She handed Taehyung over and disappeared, running off into the woods and mountains where she had once made her home, hoping that she could get a hold of her magic again.

“I’ll make all of those fuckers pay!” she swore before she left. “Just you wait, Yerin! I’ll kill all of them that did this to me! I won’t let them get away with it!”

Part of Yerin wondered if Eunha was capable of that. No one could handle all of that power within one body. The Kim king had traded his very life for a seal big enough to contain all of the cruel gods he’d wanted to get rid of.

Yet there seemed to be no trade necessary for Eunha, as she discovered the next time she saw.

*Sumi died on a spring morning.

Yerin heard the bells ring, the whispers in the street that said she died from the sweating sickness. She thought of the summons from the palace she'd received a week ago, the letter from Jae that she'd ripped and thrown in the fire before even reading it.

She regretted tearing it apart. Perhaps it would have warned her of Sumi's death.

But she could not have afforded to accept a summons so carelessly, knowing what had happened to Eunha when she'd done just that. The palace was not a place that one could just wander in.

Jimin was the first to pick up on her change in mood, on the white colors that she dressed herself in.

"Are you mourning the queen?" he asked, innocently enough. Yerin shut her eyes, wiped away the tears that threatened to fall.

"A lover," she said, as if in a daze. "From long ago. I'm mourning them."

Jimin's face fell and he murmured his condolences, though there was a question in his eyes. He knew Yerin well, knew that there was never a lover or customer she actually cared for. He must have wondered who it was she cried for, and why he'd never met them.

Yerin lightly smacked her cheeks, shaking her head. She gestured to Jimin, "Come here, Jimin. I have something for you."

The young boy came over. He was only eight, and yet Yerin had a feeling he would present as an omega. She pitied the poor thing. She had hoped that he would not have to suffer, that he might be a beta. There was still a chance, of course, and Yerin would know if she ordered a shaman or midwife to administer the test, a few drops of blood on special paper. But a part of Yerin did not want to confirm her worst fears, and so the test was never done.

She pulled a jade comb out of her chest. Jimin did not look very happy to see it. "The jade comb you give out," he recognized, sullen and pouting. "Lily said you give it to all the ones that leave you. Are you kicking me out?"

"No, no, no!" Yerin assured him. She turned him around so that he could see himself in the mirror and she held the jade comb out in front of her. "See, here? There's an engraving in gold. The others don't have that. This one is special."

Jimin narrowed his eyes suspiciously as he read it. "Really?" he murmured, bottom lip trembling.

"It means I want you to stay here forever," Yerin promised. She slowly placed the comb in his hair and pressed a kiss to the top of his head. "Will you stay here, with me?"

Jimin beamed and nodded his head, turning around to give her a hug. Then he sobered, green eyes staring at her white clothes. "I really am sorry," he said. "About your lover. You must have really loved them!"

Yerin smiled and she ran her fingers through Jimin's soft dark hair, so much like Jae's. "Yes," she admitted. "I really did."

Yerin did not like to dream often. It reminded her of things she'd much rather forget.

She awoke to a pounding headache, and the weight of more than twenty years came crashing down on her. She felt so very old, and when the beta looked to the mirror across the room, she realized

she looked very old, too. Yerin pressed a hand to her forehead, which had one of the girls who was tending to her scurry over in concern.

“Madam Yerin,” the girl cried. “Are you alright?”

Yerin waved her away. “Tired,” she said dully. “I’m just tired. I think...I’d like to be left alone for the day.”

The girl ducked her head and obeyed, though she glanced behind her as if Yerin might change her mind. Yerin raised an eyebrow and she finally left, carefully shutting the door behind her.

Yerin let out a deep sigh. She rose, joints popping as she stretched her arms from one side to the next.

She was weary and upset, the memories of what she had lost stinging her, one shard at a time. Yerin glanced back at her reflection another time, combing her fingers through her hair. There were several gray strands, seeming to have multiplied since the very first one that Yerin had found last month. The stress was a factor as well, she reasoned with herself. Worry over Taehyung, her girls, and Jimin....she did not know what Eunha wanted anymore. Her friend was a wild card, lashing out at everyone and everything.

Yerin massaged her throat, wincing at the ache as she touched her bruises. She had learned her lesson the hard way. If she questioned Eunha or pressed too much, then her former friend would not think twice about ending her life completely.

She stood up and approached her vanity, rifling around for a brush to straighten out her unruly blonde birdnest. She bumped a bottle of powder, which sent something else falling to the floor. Yerin paused and looked over. It was a little book, the little black book that she had taken from Prince Seokjin.

She grimaced. Yerin still had not read it. She’d opened it up and taken one look at the name written on the inside of the cover, then promptly closed it.

The book belonged to Jae.

She could not bring herself to read whatever it was Jae had to say. Even the thought of the omega, who she now knew was dead, still infuriated her. The last time she had seen Jae had been two years ago, and that meeting had somehow been even worse than all of them combined.

Yerin gave a little huff and picked up the book. In her dreams, she had already relieved the past. Maybe it was a sign she should finally read whatever it was Jae had written down. The beta thumbed through it, finding several folded up papers and even one map tucked inside. The book was well-worn, a diary of sorts, and each entry was titled with a date.

The more that Yerin read, though, the more she understood that it was not a diary.

All of it, each entry and word that Jae wrote, made up a confession. It was a list of crimes throughout Jae’s life, unforgivable acts that he had done, often at the behest of Adviser Paek. It was a chronicle of the politics inside the palace before, during, and near the end of the mad king's reign.

Yerin’s hands trembled and she had to take a seat as she came upon one specific entry.

I did not tell Sumi about Yerin’s child. I did not give her Yerin's letters either. I’m just trying to protect her!

Yerin thumbed through other pages, found some of the folded up papers stuffed in one crease.

I haven't sent out the letters. It's too late for that. I don't think Yerin will forgive her anyways.

The letters, Yerin thought. These are letters? From who?

She struggled to open them, her hands and fingers shook so much. There was no forgery for Sumi's words, no one alive who could have copied the chicken scrawl, the swirling hearts at the ends of her sentences.

My dearest Yerin,

I'm so sorry it's taken me this long to write to you. Please know that I haven't forgotten you, that I don't think I ever can! Things are beyond my control now. I've been forced to marry my aunt's son in order to keep my claim, but I hope it won't be for long. I'm planning a way out. For all of us.

And then -

Dear Yerin,

I know you must be angry with me. Please don't believe the words of others. I still love you, even now. But please understand that I have another person to worry about. I'm pregnant.

Another entry -

Yerin,

I think of you all the time now, about a life together after all of this. Just you and me. Is it too much of me to ask of you, too strange for me to wonder if you could one day love this child, just as you have loved me? It's one half of me, so we're halfway there already right? I hope that you might find it in your heart to love a child that is not your own.

Finally -

Yerin,

I'm sorry. Please, just trust me. If you love me at all still, then meet me at the place we first met. I want to run away with you.

Yerin was moving before she could even think about it, the book and letters falling to the floor, and she reached out, hands sweeping the items off of her desk, clattering and shattering as she broke so many expensive things in her rage. Her eyes burned and she felt as if her heart was breaking all over again, just like all of these fine things.

“Madam Yerin?”

She howled, eyes squeezed shut as she shook her fists, lashing out at whatever was nearby. The mirror, her thighs, her bedspread. Nothing she did, nothing she broke could equate to the pain in her heart.

“She's gone mad!” someone whispered, but Yerin ignored them.

There was nothing but her grief, an inferno of loss and tears and what-could-have-beens. She thought of Jae, of wringing her hands around that old coot's neck, but he was dead now.

Dead like Sumi.

Finally, Yerin fell to her knees, sobbing as she felt someone wrap their arms around her. One of her girls - probably Lily - shushed her.

"Trust me," Sumi had asked of her. "Please, just be patient and trust me."

Yet Yerin could not even do that one thing right.

Chapter End Notes

on my twitter i will probably write out my thoughts about this chapter and clarify things that might have been confusing! as always come talk to me on [twitter](#) or [curiouscat](#)
please leave comments or kudos if you enjoyed!!

ok, now to get mushy. i mentioned earlier that it's been 1 year of rising sun and gosh how time has flown. it doesn't really feel like it should have been a year? maybe more like half a year...but wow! with this realization, i've been kind of in the dumps. I feel a little disheartened that it's taken me a year to get this far. a part of me feels like i should have already finished rising sun by now, and that this whole year has just been wasted on dragging it out. i'm also afraid that because it's taken so long to get this far, that i will lose readers along the way, that people will move on to other interests or get tired of this story completely.

but another part of me realizes i'm stupid for thinking that way. when i look at the word count, i have at least 150k+ words written for this story in ONE year. compared to my output of years' prior, that's at least 10x the amount of words i've written before, usually averaging around 15k words each year, and i would be LUCKY to even write that much.

i guess what i'm trying to say is that I definitely feel like i have grown as a writer, at least when it comes to the amount of words i've written. i know that i still have a long way to go, and rising sun is just one step on my journey. i really hope that you readers will stick with me in 2019!

much love and happy new year,

SeleneIlene, AKA Cindy

<3 :)

An Understanding

Chapter Summary

Seokjin meets his brother and speaks with Namjoon. Jimin decides to let go of the past.

Chapter Notes

I'M SO SORRY THIS CHAPTER IS LATE :(((I PROMISED TWO WEEKS BUT IT WAS PRETTY MUCH THREE WEEKS!! school has just started and all of my classes are horrible...I WILL TRY TO BE BETTER THO!! my ultimate goal is to have Rising Sun finished sometime this year ☺

i hope this chapter does not disappoint, it was a little harder for me to get out because i didn't have as much of it plotted out.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Two weeks before the ceremony, Seokjin ran into his brother.

It was a coincidence. If Seokjin had known he was going to see Taehyung's face when he went out to pick flowers for his wedding arrangements, he would have chosen another time or even day to do so. The flower in the gardens were in full bloom, and Seokjin so graciously had his pick of whatever he wanted, courtesy of the king. He thought he would go ahead and do so, get it out of the way so that he could focus on other things. More important things.

So he went outside, walking along the hedges and bushes with Ru by his side. Leah had stayed behind to write a few letters for him, while Jimin was making sure that the servants had delivered him the right garments for the *special* day.

Seokjin had not thought much on Taehyung at all. He spent time thinking about Namjoon, about what it was Lord Jeon really wanted from him, about how he could put everything into motion, even about his mother. There was no time to think about the little brother who had betrayed him.

Not until Seokjin rounded the corner of a rather large hedge and was staring him in the face. He jerked back immediately, giving Ru a scare as he clutched at her arm suddenly, rather viciously.

“Jin?” she murmured, confused.

In a split second, the omega composed himself. Seokjin let go of Ru, grabbing the skirts of his hanbok to give a dramatic curtsy.

“Prince Taehyung,” he greeted, refusing to meet his brother's eyes. “Forgive me. The weather has me feeling rather faint. I'm afraid I must retire.”

He meant to leave before Taehyung could pick his jaw off of the ground, but his brother was

always quick. The alpha reached out and grabbed his elbow with a helpless sort of plea, “Seokjin!”

Seokjin paused, but refused to entertain him with something so much as a glance. “Do you need something?” he asked, short and snappy.

“Seokjin,” it sounded like a sob. “Seokjin, please look at me! Just look and *listen*!”

You’re weak, their father had told him once. You’ve always been weak.

No, I’m not! Seokjin had protested and slit the throat of the servant at his feet to prove his point.

He’d thought he’d become strong by living like his father, and yet the weakness stayed with him still, an ever growing thorn in his side that tore out the steel in his spine and softened him.

Seokjin’s heart felt like it was burning, and his eyes stung. He closed them, but all he could see was that chubby-cheeked boy staring up at him with awe in his eyes and a boxy grin on his face. Seokjin turned around, pushing away the hand on his arm, and looked at his brother - actually *looked* at him this time - and what he saw surprised him .

Taehyung’s skin seemed pale, much paler than Seokjin ever remembered it being, and there were bags under his eyes, his dark, empty eyes. He did not look like a young newlywed, vibrant and flushed with joy. He looked like a corpse, a dead man walking.

“Ru!” Seokjin called. The girl came forward, ducking her head.

“Seokjin, please!” his brother pleaded, deep voice hoarse and strained. Seokjin ignored him for a moment longer.

“Head back and wait for me,” Seokjin instructed his servant. “This won’t take me long.”

Ru did as she was ordered, and it was just Taehyung and Seokjin now, both brothers staring at each other. A bird or two chirped as they stood there, and the wind whistled by.

“I’m looking,” Seokjin said quietly. “I’m listening.”

Taehyung blinked. “You didn’t come find me, Seokjin,” he murmured, looking a little lost. “You knew I was in the palace, didn’t you? So why didn’t you come see me?”

Seokjin narrowed his eyes. “Why should I have visited you, Taehyung? Why do you think I would have wanted to see you?”

His brother flinched, furrowing his brow and letting out a sort of whimper, like a wounded animal. Seokjin realized with startlingly clarity that this was the first time his brother had ever been faced with the cold ice wall known as Prince Seokjin. Gone were the warm eyes and teasing smiles, the soft hugs and kisses and pats on the head.

“Seokjin,” he tried again, giving a shaky smile. “Come on! Why are you acting like this?”

His brother reached out his hand, as if to pull Seokjin in for a hug or maybe it was just to touch him in some sort of way. Regardless, Seokjin would not allow it. He smacked Taehyung’s hand away.

“Don’t play dumb with me!” the omega hissed. “Do you think I don’t know? Do you really think I’m that stupid?”

Taehyung’s bottom lip trembled and the alpha looked down at his hand, staring at the back of it, the red mark that was starting to form. “Ah,” he said. “You hit me, hyung.”

Hyung.

Seokjin swallowed the lump in his throat. “You told them where I was,” his own voice shook. “You *betrayed* me, Taehyung. Now you’re acting like you did nothing wrong.”

Taehyung shook his head furiously. “No!” he denied. “That’s not it! I wasn’t sure if you knew or not - “

“So what?” Seokjin laughed. “You planned on leaving me in the dark if I didn’t?”

“I don’t know,” Taehyung admitted helplessly. He hung his head. “I don’t really know what I was going to do. I’m...I’m sorry, hyung.”

“Sorry, huh?” Seokjin repeated faintly. “I suppose I am, too.”

He looked his brother over, at the golden robes of the Jeon clan he’d been dressed in. “I hope that omega was worth it,” Seokjin commented.

He turned.

“Rut,” Taehyung said suddenly.

Seokjin’s brow furrowed and he paused mid-step. “What did you say?”

“They forced me into a rut. The next thing I knew I was mated to Jeongguk,” Taehyung’s words were rushed, almost too hard to pick apart. “Lord Jeon...he threatened to kill Jeongguk if I didn’t tell them where you were! Our mating was so fresh, so new that I couldn’t refuse it. How could I let them kill my omega?”

Seokjin took a deep breath, hand raising to grab at his chest, to stop himself from heaving, crying and falling to his knees. The claws nagged at him again, urging him to lunge at his betrayer and pay him back no matter what, and yet Seokjin could do nothing of the sort. He was weak.

He had always been weak.

“Oh, Taehyung,” Seokjin’s voice trembled. He had a million different things he wanted to say, yet he could only say one - the most important advice he could impart. He gathered his composure, straightening his shoulders as he let out the breath he’d been holding.

“Hyung?”

Seokjin glanced over his shoulder. “Take care of your mate. It’s important you get along.”

He did not wait to see or hear Taehyung’s response. Already his heart felt like it was breaking. He could offer his brother no comfort or warmth, not when Taehyung would then look to him and ask questions. Seokjin was a firm believer in not allowing mistakes to repeat themselves.

Right now, it would be better if Taehyung were blind. If he did not know of Seokjin’s plans. If he did not know anything, then his omega’s life could not be used as a bargaining chip for that sort of information again.

It was neither comfort nor warmth, yet Seokjin liked to think it was something.

“Red and white?” the seamstress asked again, adjusting her spectacles. “Are you *sure* that’s what Prince Seokjin has requested?”

“Positive,” Jimin said through gritted teeth. He waved his hands over the sketches in front of them. “Red and white, with the pattern designed just so!”

The seamstress crossed her arms over her chest. “Hmm,” she said, nodding.

Jimin felt a lightness in his chest, that familiar feeling of hope as he believed that she might finally agree to hand over what it was he’d come for.

“Yeah, not happening,” she held up a hand and waved it.

Just like that, all of Jimin’s hopes came crashing down on him. “Why not?” he asked, pouting with his own arms crossed now.

The seamstress softened at his puppy eyes and let out a sigh.

“I have orders from higher ups, alright, kid? Prince Seokjin is to be wearing soft colors, a gentle color scheme. Not this, this striking thing!”

Jimin’s bottom lip trembled. “What sort of higher ups?”

“Just the sort of people who are way above your pay grade, okay? Tell your prince to take it up with his fiancé if it’s that big of an issue.”

Sensing that the woman would budge no longer, Jimin’s soft act hardened into stone. “Fine!” he muttered, grabbing the sketches from her desk and stuffing them in his satchel.

There were all sorts of ways to disrespect someone in the palace.

From openly mocking to straight up ignoring, Jimin had seen it all in his almost year’s worth of work in the palace. He himself had experienced much of it, serving under Lady Jeon, enduring her brown, hawklike stare which always turned green with envy as soon as it landed on Jimin. She’d called him “little piggy” many times and poked at his chubby cheeks, even had him beaten once for not getting the stain out of her hanbok properly. She’d fed him her scraps and dressed him in dull colors like brown and grey to make sure he never stood out when standing next to her.

Jimin had hated her, had found himself wishing for Jeongguk’s return if only so he might not have to serve his mother any longer.

Jimin was the servant of a prince now, of a soon-to-be imperial consort, and Seokjin dressed him in much finer clothes, ordered delicious meals for Jimin himself to eat. Yet Jimin’s status, and that of Seokjin’s, did not seem to stop them from being disrespected.

Like here, right now.

By refusing Seokjin’s demands, the tailors and seamstresses were disrespecting him, and Jimin didn’t like that at all. Jimin heard enough when he walked the halls, hushed voices talking about the cruel Prince Seokjin, about the mad king’s spawn - who knew when he would snap? - and so many other things that made Jimin want to throw a fist or two in their faces and get them to shut up.

So lost in thoughts was he as he left the workshop, that he bumped into someone.

“Ah, sorry,” Jimin apologized, bowing. He looked up and suddenly his mouth was dry.

Lord Min Yoongi and Jeon Jeongguk stood in front of him. Lord Min smiled and shook his head.

“It’s fine. Jimin, right?”

Jimin nodded, gaze never leaving Jeongguk. The other omega was just standing there, mouth closed, blinking at him with those big doe eyes of his.

Lord Min elbowed his companion. “Jeongguk-ah,” he murmured.

Jeongguk jolted and ducked his head, breaking their staring contest. The two made their way inside the workshop, and Jimin stared after them. He could hear Lord Min very faintly say, “- getting some higher collars - “

Lord Min’s hand hovered over the side of Jeongguk’s neck, playing with the bandage that surely covered the younger’s mark. A stone dropped in Jimin’s stomach as he remembered the mark as he had last seen it.

A raw, open wound that threatened to bleed still, even after months of being mated. An incomplete bonding, a standstill that would worsen the afflicted until two choices were left: sever or die. Jimin had seen many omegas with incomplete bonds, so rotten that they grew like a tumor on their necks. They were unwanted by the very same assholes who had bitten them in the first place and left behind like trash.

Yerin rubbed all sorts of lotions into their necks and whispered words of encouragement so sweetly. Eventually she drugged them up enough to go to sleep and took a knife to their scent glands. The lucky ones woke up, unable to scent or mate ever again. The unlucky ones did not and Yerin had them buried.

Jimin wondered if Jeongguk’s mark was swelling yet. He hoped not. Jimin hoped that it was closing, scabbing over as it sealed, even if that meant that Jeongguk had received Taehyung’s love.

It’s what he deserves, Jimin thought. It’s what I deserve.

He had been cruel to the younger boy, pretending to be his friend and then cursing him. How ironic was it, when the rumors which had once said Jeongguk killed Taehyung later said he married him instead?

No matter how it had happened, Jimin knew he had no right to be jealous. He had his chance at happiness, yet he’d thrown it back in Taehyung’s face. To protect him.

To protect the both of them.

“It won’t work. Taehyung will be ostracized for mating a commoner like you,” Yerin warned. She had cupped Jimin’s face in her hands, looking at him rather softly, more softly than she’d looked at him in a long time.

“And you? Nothing good comes from getting involved with a Kim, Jimin. Trust me,” Yerin said, a haunted expression on her face.

She had been right in the end. Jimin had been bound for heartbreak no matter what, whether he’d stayed with Taehyung or not. He let out a sigh as he trudged back to Seokjin’s rooms. He only hoped that his heartbreak did not bleed out, staining the lives of those he touched.

“They won’t make it in white and red,” Jimin wrung his hands anxiously as he relayed the news to Seokjin. “They say it needs to be softer colors, that someone else *higher up* requested that! Like what the hell! Who’s higher up than you?”

Seokjin didn't appear to be concerned with the blatant disrespect. He merely inclined his head, leaning back in his chair. "Many people, Jimin," he hummed. "Many more than you think."

"You're not just going to wear what they want you to, are you?" Jimin asked. It seemed impossible. Seokjin never backed down, unless it was absolutely necessary.

"Of course not," his friend laughed. He shrugged his shoulders. "I'll find someone in the capital to make it for me."

"On such short notice?" Ru murmured, worried. "And will they even be as good as the tailors in the palace?"

"If they can't make it, I'll take whatever they have that's similar in my sizing. I'm not that picky," he said.

"Not picky, my ass," Jimin muttered under his breath, thinking about how angry Seokjin was when he learned that the banners they would display were that of the Bangtan Four.

"Is the Bangtan Four getting married?" the former prince had hissed, pacing the length of his room. "No! It's me and Namjoon! And what are we? Oh, right! Kims!"

Seokjin seemed to have overheard his words, as he narrowed his eyes. "I'm not picky about certain things!" he protested, lifting his head high. "I don't really care when it comes to my clothes. I can pull off anything!"

Jimin smiled. "Alright. Do you want me to see what I can do?"

Seokjin waved his hand. "Go if you would like. If not, just pass it onto Leah."

Leah looked up, attention finally drawn away from the piles of letters she was writing at the sound of her name. "Hey!" she squawked. "I'm busy enough as it is!"

"I'll do it, Leah. Don't worry," Jimin scoffed. "I'd hate to take you away from your exciting work."

Seokjin nodded his head. "Take an escort with you when you go. Preferably today or tomorrow. I'd hate if something happened."

Jimin frowned but agreed. He wondered if Seokjin was talking about the ever-present fear that had always existed when an unmated omega wandered the capital streets, or something else. Either way, he hoped he wouldn't encounter it.

Before Jimin left, he looked Seokjin over one last time. "Did something happen when you were picking your flowers?"

He noticed a sort of expression to Seokjin's face, the tightness and lines that hadn't been there this morning, and at Jimin's question, a shadow passed all of it and eclipsed the anxiety with dread.

After a moment of silence, Seokjin said, "I met with Taehyung unexpectedly."

That was it. Seokjin did not elaborate, and yet Jimin was glad. He did not want to hear about Taehyung, because hearing about him would only worsen the wound in his heart. He did not ask Seokjin what they had talked about, did not gleefully wonder if maybe Taehyung had mentioned him. Jimin could not summon any of his previous childish infatuation, too drained by the steady, heavy love that had dragged him down over the last few months.

I will have to give up on it, Jimin thought, walking through the crowded streets with two guards by his side. *Everything*.

He remembered Jeongguk - a young noble omega with his whole life ahead of him, his soft skin and doe eyes, the wide, nervous smile he'd always greet Jimin with - and the mark that refused to heal. If Taehyung did not accept him, or if Jeongguk did not have anything done about the mark, then Jeongguk would certainly die.

And if Taehyung then came calling again, if he even thought of Jimin once after abandoning Jeongguk, then Jimin would not accept him. He could not.

Everything had changed and yet nothing had changed.

Jimin still could not have Jeongguk's blood on his hands.

So lost in his thoughts was Jimin that he nearly ran into one of the vendors' carts, almost getting a face full of steamed buns. If it weren't for one of the guards, he would have surely fell on top of it, but the alpha had caught him, hand around his waist as the other landed on Jimin's shoulder, steadying him.

"Are you alright, Jimin?" the alpha asked softly. His hands did not leave Jimin.

The voice nagged at him, too familiar to ignore. Jimin finally met the alpha's gaze, paying attention to his face. Once he did, he recognized him as the alpha he'd spent his last heat with. Jimin couldn't help it. His lips twisted into a frown, and he looked down. "Thank you," he murmured. "But I would appreciate it if you let go of me now."

The alpha appeared crestfallen, but he did not refuse Jimin's request. "Do you remember me?" he asked.

Barely. The alpha hadn't left much of an impression on Jimin, and while he recognized his face, there was no way Jimin could remember his name. Jimin told him as much quietly, and the alpha's face fell even further.

The other guard, a beta, looked uncomfortable and coughed. "Should we move on to the next shop?"

Jimin nodded his head and they moved on to fulfill what they had set out on doing in the first place. The very first tailor they had gone to had refused their business, too overworked as it was, but he'd recommended them a small seamstress a few streets over. She was a tall omega with long legs and rough hands, which Jimin found out when she first offered to shake his own. Her hair was a striking color - an orange, almost fiery red - and freckles decorated her pasty white cheeks.

"You're not from around here, are you," Jimin said more than asked, stating the obvious.

The woman beamed and nodded her head. She waved her hands and said something about getting a foothold in the east, something about her husband and gold and maybe even a famine. She spoke their language rather brokenly, but managed to get most of her points across.

"Bethany," she pointed to herself.

Jimin bowed and told her his own name, then pulled the sheets out from his satchel to show her the designs.

"Two weeks," he said. "Could you have something like this done by then?"

Bethany blinked, taking the designs into her own hands. Her lips twisted into a frown and she brought the paper close to her face, eyes scanning over every inch of parchment paper. After a few tense moments, she set it down on the table in front of her, then did something odd.

She clapped her hands. A smile spread across her face and she nodded her head eagerly. "So pretty," she sighed. "I would be honored. Ah, so long since I did wedding gowns!"

"You know it's a wedding gown?" Jimin asked, surprised at how quick she seemed to recognize something like it, given that she said she'd only been here for a year or so.

Bethany just blinked, tilting her head to the side. Jimin explained that it was a little different than the traditional clothes the brides in their kingdom usually wore, more revealing at the neck. It had a feel of Qing style mixed in it. The design of it had made Jimin wonder where Seokjin had even found it in the first place.

Bethany's smile softened and she gestured to the design, beckoning Jimin closer.

"The white color," she murmured. "It's tradition for the bride to wear white in my homeland. For light and goodness. Then you have the red. It's normal for your brides to wear red, right? This dress is like a mixing of both cultures."

Bethany sighed once more, almost longingly. "Is your bride marrying a Westerner?"

"No," Jimin muttered, a little unnerved. "Nothing like that. I don't understand why he would have this done in the first place."

The seamstress beamed. "I think maybe your bride must really wish for an auspicious marriage."

"Right," Jimin said weakly, knowing this was not the case whatsoever. Seokjin would sooner gut his groom than pray for the gods to bless their union. Bethany, however, did not need to know that, and so Jimin handed over the down payment for the outfit with a promise that it would be ready a few days before the wedding for pickup.

Jimin knew he would have to ask Seokjin just where it was he'd gotten the design in the first place, or else the curiosity would nag at him forever.

White is for mourning, Jimin thought. *No whatever this woman seems to think.*

He and the two guards made their way back out into the streets of the capital, mission accomplished, and back to the palace without any hindrances. At the palace gates, Jimin bowed and thanked them both for escorting him outside. The beta waved his hand and said it was no problem, giving a bow of his own as he left. It was the alpha who remained, staring at Jimin with a serious, determined expression on his face.

"My name is Hosung," the alpha told Jimin, frowning. "Since you said you couldn't remember my name, I thought I should tell you it."

Jimin forced a smile on his face as he nodded. "Ah, I see. Is there something you needed, Hosung?"

The alpha fidgeted for a few moments, then took a deep breath. "I was wondering," he began, "if I could start courting you?"

Jimin blinked, a little taken aback. He had thought his disinterest in the alpha showed, and yet here he was, asking for a courtship? At Jimin's silence, the alpha hurried to speak.

“It’s just I can’t stop thinking about you. You’re so beautiful and you smell so nice. I noticed you before you even asked me to spend a heat with you, so when you did, it felt like a dream. But then once it was over you disappeared. You would ignore me in the halls, wouldn’t even spare me a glance,” Hosung frowned, wringing his hands. “Did I do something wrong?”

“No,” Jimin admitted faintly, baffled at the sudden confession. “I just usually try not to get attached to alphas I spend heats with.”

It was the truth. What helped was that Jimin always chose alphas with the least desirable scents to help him through his heats, plain-faced alphas with almost scentless pheromones. It made it easier to forget them.

Hosung flushed. “Oh,” he said, looking lost.

Jimin looked Hosung over one more time and found him to be rather ordinary.

“ - an ordinary life,” Yerin had sniffled, forehead pressed against his upper back as she cried. “Once you’re out of here, you should live a life that’s like that. Ordinary, mundane.”

For an ordinary omega like myself, huh? Jimin had thought, unmoved by his mentor’s tears.

Now he remembered the life she had wished for him once he left the brothel, and he saw it panning out in front of him if he accepted what Hosung had offered. He would settle down with an ordinary alpha, with Hosung, probably pop out a minimum of four or even five children, live a modest, maybe even poor lifestyle and work until he died. Simple as that. Jimin should just be happy that he was not alone, would be content with the lot in life he was given.

He thought of Taehyung, who was mated to Jeongguk now, the mark that connected the two of them together in a way that could never be replicated. Taehyung and Jeongguk, already struggling to find their footing as mates, a mark that swelled and refused to close, the whole court watching and waiting for the inevitable first child to be born.

There was no place for Jimin there.

No place for Jimin at all.

So he reached out and took Hosung’s hand in his own.

“Ok,” Jimin agreed, words like lead. “You can court me.”

Yoongi was worried.

And whenever Yoongi was worried, Hoseok became worried. Yoongi often skipped meals when something was on his mind, would pace for hours, maybe not even leave his room for days. He wrote letter after letter and read book after book, working on things that Hoseok could usually never wrap his mind around. They involved the other side of Yoongi that so few were allowed to see, the part of the omega which could sew discord or harmony wherever he went with a snap of his fingers.

Hoseok often had to drag Yoongi away from his work, hands digging into his shoulders as he crooned words of comfort into his ear. He would persuade him with walks in the gardens or performances in the capital, or any other promises that would allow the omega to relax.

Hoseok had thought things would be a little different once Yoongi returned from his father’s estate,

once he put his crooked uncle in prison and assumed control of his inheritance. He'd hoped that Yoongi wouldn't worry over his work so much, would be less stressed and more open.

And yet none of that happened. Yoongi came back, more stressed and worried than ever.

Hoseok didn't know what had happened.

"I have you to myself for the first time in a long time," Hoseok whined, wrapping his arms around Yoongi in a hug. The omega had been pouring over books in his room for hours now. "Yet you're hidden away in the library or your rooms, avoiding me!"

Yoongi's nose twitched, the only acknowledgement of Hoseok's efforts. "I still have work to do," he reasoned. "Even more of it than I did before."

"Impossible!" Hoseok protested. He leaned forward, peering at just what it was Yoongi was researching this time.

The air caught in Hoseok's throat as his eyes swept over the scrawlings of sigils and symbols and the fancy names of different herbs. He averted his gaze, stomach twisting at the reminder of Yoongi's second side.

It was different to see it firsthand. A part of him felt cursed just looking at it, knowing that the spellbooks were something his eyes were not meant to see. Hoseok buried his face into the junction between Yoongi's shoulder and neck, sighing.

"Magic won't solve all of your problems, love," the alpha murmured, pressing soft kisses along Yoongi's scent glands.

His omega scowled. "Normally, it would," he argued. "But this time...there's something that's been bothering me lately."

Hoseok tensed. He didn't know much about magic, only a few bits and pieces that Yoongi had tried and failed to explain to him, but he knew that when something...well, *magical* bothered him, that there was something very wrong indeed.

"What is it?" he asked quickly.

Yoongi sighed. Suddenly the weariness to him made sense, the bags under his eyes and the lines that appeared on his forehead. "It's like there's something coming," he muttered, hands twitching as they came up to massage his temples. "Something perverse...I can feel it getting stronger."

"Like a storm or...?" Hoseok trailed off, not sure where to start guessing.

"Like a person," Yoongi finally said, voice soft. His hands covered his ears and he closed his eyes, brow furrowing as he concentrated. "A twisted, bloodthirsty witch. Someone who wants to do horrible things to many, many people."

"Have you told your mother about this?" Hoseok wondered. It was from Eunha that Yoongi had learned all he knew. If Eunha, the most powerful witch of her generation, didn't know what was going on, then no one would.

Yoongi shook his head, opening his eyes and dropping his hands. One of his hands landed on top of Hoseok's and their fingers threaded together. "I haven't been able to contact her recently. There's silence most of the time. That or static. It makes me worried."

Hoseok ran his thumb over the back of Yoongi's hand, making a shushing sound. "I'm sure he's

fine,” he assured him. “Your mom is like, a god or whatever, right? She’s probably busy.”

Yoongi frowned. “Busy doing what?” he muttered, mostly to himself.

“Hey, hey,” Hoseok pulled away, turning Yoongi towards him so that he might see his future mate’s face. “Why are you worrying so much, love? There’s no need for all of this. Least of all now. You have other things to think about. Like Seokjin and Namjoon, or what we’re going to do about Jeongguk.”

Yoongi’s frown only deepened. “Right,” he remarked dryly, “because *that’s* supposed to make me feel better.”

Hoseok sighed. He had only meant that they should focus on the problems at home first, before turning their eyes towards some invisible threat that Yoongi sensed in his gut. Hoseok didn’t like it, how Yoongi cared so much about the others that he would neglect his own health.

“One problem at a time, love,” Hoseok told him. “If you have too much on your plate, then just share it with me. Let me help you.”

For a moment, Yoongi was silent. Then he took both of Hoseok’s hands in his own, eyes wide and bright. “Really? You really mean it? You’ll help?”

“Of course!” Hoseok affirmed, beaming.

Yoongi smiled back. “Then you wouldn’t mind if I had you make sure Seokjin and Namjoon met up before the wedding?”

Hoseok wilted, smile falling from his face. To come between the furious Prince Seokjin and the sulky King Namjoon and try to bring them together when both had refused the summons of the other?

Suddenly, Hoseok felt a little faint.

“Seokie?” Yoongi looked up at him, bottom lip trembling. “You’ll help me, won’t you?”

His precious omega, who worked so hard that he never got enough sleep and skipped meals, who looked thinner and sicker as all of his burdens weighed down on him at once - how could Hoseok ever refuse him?

To say that Seokjin was surprised to see the visitor who greeted him first thing in the morning would be an understatement. Seokjin himself had seen very little of General Jung, even when he worked as servant in the palace. Jung always made himself scarce, keeping to the practice fields or moping about in his omega’s vacant rooms. Seokjin had thought it almost tragic how disgustingly sweet on Yoongi the general was.

Seokjin knew that it must be at the behest of Lord Min himself that General Jung was even here to greet him in the first place. The general was Namjoon’s closest ally. He’d done his best to avoid Seokjin in the month leading up to their nuptials, perhaps as a means of declaring sides.

Seokjin thought it was funny. There was only one side, despite what everyone else thought, and that was the side of the throne. Nothing else mattered except for who sat on the throne, and Seokjin just so happened to be condemned into sitting next to it for the rest of his life.

“My, my, General Jung!” Seokjin greeted, as pleasant as could be. “What brings you to my

chambers so early in the morning?"

Thought Seokjin had never seen him much, he already knew what sort of man the general was due to palace gossip. Giddy and always smiling, Jung Hoseok would have been taken for a beta if not for his overwhelming stench that screamed alpha. He was too good-natured, the servants whispered. Too good-looking!

And yet he was an alpha, the very same alpha who had succeeded in slaughtering so many of the mad king's best soldiers.

Seokjin tried to picture this smiley-faced fool on the battlefield, painted in blood, and yet his imagination came up short.

"I thought I might accompany you on a walk, my prince," General Jung beamed, but there was something about the stillness to his eyes that gave him away. He clearly didn't want to suffer Seokjin's presence anymore than Seokjin did his.

Perhaps he hoped Seokjin would refuse. Ha. As if the prince would give him the satisfaction!

"Well, how thoughtful!" Seokjin curtised, a wide smile on his face. "I would love to join you!"

Jung's eyes crinkled and his grin grew even wider somehow. "Great!" he exclaimed, voice too tight to contain any real joy.

They walked in silence from one wing to the next, and Seokjin was beginning to wonder what the true purpose of this walk had been if they weren't even going to talk. The only time anyone ever wanted to go on walks with him was if they thought they had something important to say.

"What's this really about, General Jung?" Seokjin asked finally, breaking the silence and getting straight to the point.

"Can't I get to know you a little better, Prince Seokjin?" Jung asked innocently enough. "You're going to marry my best friend. I'm sure he'd prefer it if we got along."

"He'd prefer it if he wasn't marrying me," Seokjin remarked coolly.

The omega didn't really pay attention to his surroundings as he walked, his head a mess. He felt a little nervous now, in the presence of someone who had shared Namjoon's counsel as of late. He wondered what sorts of awful, terrible things Namjoon had told General Jung.

Jung shook his head and muttered something about "stubborn Kims".

"He asked for you a week ago, yet you did not come," the general finally said after clearing his throat.

Seokjin lifted his head, refusing to be intimidated. "I'm not a dog!" he spat. "I do not come when my master calls. If he wanted to see me that much, he would have visited when I asked for him!"

Jung's lips twitched. "Perhaps he had similar thoughts. That's why he did not come."

The general paused, coming to a stop in front of an all too familiar door, and Seokjin halted as well, blinking. Before Seokjin could even fully process where they were, the general was knocking on the door.

"Your Majesty!" he called. "A special guest is here to see you!"

“You!” Seokjin hissed, turning towards the general with a snarl on his face. His hands clenched at his side, and he wanted so badly to deck the alpha in the face, but as the door opened, a sense of panic overtook Seokjin and he glanced back towards the door.

It was Namjoon, dressed in the red and gold of royalty, a crown crookedly placed on top of his head. “Hoseok,” he croaked, golden eyes wide. “What - “

He stopped, perhaps finally taking in the sight of Seokjin.

It was the first time they’d met since the day everything had went so very wrong. Any other contact had been through servants, through gifts or letters. A part of Seokjin had yearned for Namjoon, for his touch and smell, and yet another had yearned for another reason, hoping to sink its claws deep into the other man’s heart, to tear him apart just as he had done Seokjin.

“Prince Seokjin has a few matters to discuss with you,” General Jung bowed. “I’ll be taking my leave.”

Seokjin turned to him once more, mouth opening, ready to beg the general not to leave the two of them alone no matter what, but the alpha was gone before he could even get a word out.

“Come inside,” Namjoon muttered, beckoning Seokjin forward with a flick of his hand. Having no other option, Seokjin obeyed and entered the library. He felt so small, like a nervous, frightened rat caught by a mouse. It was just as he remembered the last time he had been here. The last time when -

Seokjin’s cheeks flushed and he cast the memories aside.

“General Jung was lying,” Seokjin told the king, frowning. “He brought me here without telling me where we were going. I have nothing to say to you.”

Namjoon seemed to be ignoring him. On his way to one of the desks, he paused to whisper something to one of his servants. The beta boy bowed, then scurried off somewhere. Seokjin couldn’t help the stab of envy that pricked him as he caught sight of the boy’s face, finding it more pleasing than the average servant. He wondered if Namjoon had been busying himself with betas in Seokjin’s absence.

“I figured as much,” Namjoon finally acknowledged Seokjin’s words, shrugging his shoulders. “Hoseok and Yoongi have always had a habit of meddling where they see fit.”

The king pulled out his chair, sitting down to continue writing whatever it was he’d been doing when Jung’s knock interrupted him. He didn’t say anything else, just picked up one of his feather quills and scratched away at his paper.

Seokjin’s teeth clenched. What a waste.

“Fine,” he said. “I’ll be on my way then. I just didn’t want you to misunderstand.”

“Misunderstand?” Namjoon frowned. His head cocked to the side, though he did not look up. “What do you mean?”

“I didn’t want you to think I had anything to say to you. That I even wanted to look at you. I would have never come if it hadn’t been for -”

“Alright,” Namjoon interrupted, face like stone. “I get it.”

Seokjin felt like the wind had been knocked out of him. His hand curled into fists once more, nails digging crescents into the palms of his hand. Something rattled in his chest, a keen sense of longing to be acknowledged, to be looked at. He didn't know that being ignored could be the worst feeling in the world, but it was.

"That's it?" Seokjin asked, voice low.

Namjoon didn't so much as blink. "You said you didn't want to be here. What else is there?"

What else is there? What else is there? What else -

One of Seokjin's hands came up, grasping at his chest, twisting and pulling the material away an inch or two, because suddenly it was like he could not breathe, overcome with a fury so great it burned his lungs.

"What else is there?" Seokjin mocked, snarling.

Before he knew it, he was striding over, grabbing at the paper in front of Namjoon and furiously ripping it into pieces. Next he knocked over the stack of books, the pile of scrolls and the ink pot. Whatever Seokjin could get his hands on, he destroyed. The phoenix on his back cooed gleefully, but begged for something sweeter, something redder than the ink that now stained his hands.

"What are you doing?" Namjoon squawked, alarmed. He scooted back in his chair, away from Seokjin's furious hands which tore and smashed whatever was in his sight on the desk.

Soon there was nothing left untouched on the desk, all of it a mess of torn paper and ink splotches. Seokjin breathed in long, deep pants, blinking away the hot tears that stung his eyes.

Finally, finally, Namjoon was looking at him.

"You're acting crazy," Namjoon said softly, something in his eyes, a sort of musk in the air. The alpha stood, approaching Seokjin with small, quiet steps forward.

"You make me crazy," Seokjin's voice trembled. His hands shook as he brought them up to his face, staining his cheeks with ink. "You never even told me you were sorry, yet I'm going to be marrying you in a week. Now you're ignoring me. How cruel is that?"

"It was selfish of me," Namjoon muttered. "But I wanted you to know how I felt. When you ignored me those weeks before the coronation."

He reached out, handkerchief in hand, and began to wipe the ink from Seokjin's hands and face tenderly. When his hands lingered, Seokjin drew back, shaking his head as he reasoned with the alpha.

"I had thought that maybe you even knew, that you were playing with me all this time - "

"No," Namjoon interrupted, voice almost a growl. "I would have never done something like that to you."

"Yet you would strip me bare in front of your closest advisers?" Seokjin snarled. "You would dishonor me in such a way, would treat me as if I were some common whore?"

"This again," Namjoon sighed. "You act as if I fucked you right in front of them."

"You might as well have!" Seokjin spat. "It's clear that's how little you care for my virtue!"

“Virtue?” Namjoon laughed, and that was enough for Seokjin.

Seokjin reached forward and slapped him, hard enough to turn the alpha’s head. As soon as he’d done it, he regretted it. Omegas weren’t supposed to strike their alphas. If anything it was the other way around. Seokjin barely dared to breathe, afraid of what retribution he would soon face.

There was a mostly red mark on Namjoon’s cheek, marred slightly by an ink smear or two. Namjoon pressed a hand to his cheek, cradling it with disappointment written all over his face. “You actually hit me,” he mused.

You hit me, hyung.

Seokjin brought the hand that had slapped Namjoon, that had struck Taehyung close to his chest, a little afraid of himself.

“I’m sorry,” Seokjin apologized quickly. “I don’t know what came over me. I just...you make everything sound so vulgar...you’ve been disregarding my feelings. I don’t like it.”

Namjoon took a deep breath, rolling his shoulders.

“I’m sorry, too,” the alpha finally said. “You were right. I have yet to take responsibility for anything, to offer you a proper apology. But you shouldn’t have hit me. That sort of thing I won’t accept from you, and I don’t expect you to accept it from me either.”

Seokjin ducked his head, properly shamefaced. A part of him wondered where the impulse to strike the people he cared for came from, and yet another ugly part knew exactly where it stemmed from.

Namjoon gestured to a different table, moving over and pulling out a seat for Seokjin.

“We’ll sit. We’ll talk. Like you said, we’re going to be married in a week, no matter how little we may want it,” Namjoon reasoned. “We should at least try to get along, yes?”

Seokjin nodded his head. “We should be civil,” the omega agreed.

Namjoon took the seat across from him, hands folded on top of the table. He gave Seokjin a shaky smile. “I’m sorry for disregarding your feelings. I didn’t think it was that big of a deal to show them your back, especially if it would prove your innocence. Seems I was wrong, in more ways than one. It was a big deal.”

“I’m sorry for hitting you and ruining your things,” Seokjin said, sulky. He wasn’t so much sorry for ruining whatever Namjoon had been writing. The alpha deserved it for ignoring an omega.

“I’m sorry for not seeing you sooner,” Namjoon’s voice turned solid and yet soft. He sounded so much like the Joon that Seokjin used to know. “I didn’t want you to think I was weak, that I was some love struck alpha nipping at your heels.”

“Same,” Seokjin admitted, an unpleasant flush rising to his face. He just knew the tips of his ears were turning red. The omega took a deep breath. “I’m sorry for knowing, but not coming to you first about it.”

He meant knowing Namjoon’s identity, but it was so very hard to word it, so he hoped the alpha might be able to read between the lines. The alpha nodded, eyes a little glossed over as he stared at Seokjin for several awkward moments. Eventually the alpha cleared his throat.

“I know we can’t get back what we had,” Namjoon reached over, taking Seokjin’s hands in his

own. His rough, scarred hands. For some reason, the thought of kissing them popped into Seokjin's mind.

"But maybe we can build something else. Maybe we can try to be friends at least."

"Friends," Seokjin repeated, the word too tart on his tongue.

Do people usually kiss and fuck their friends? He thought bitterly, helplessly. Dig their teeth into their necks and have children together?

He already knew the answers to those questions.

"Okay," he told Namjoon, tightening his grip on the alpha's hands, which had previously been loose and limp. "We'll be friends."

There was a knock on the door, and a part of Seokjin wanted to spring away from Namjoon as the visitor made their entrance. But it was just the beta boy from earlier, so Seokjin stayed where he was. Besides, it shouldn't be that scandalous to see the king and his future consort holding hands.

The boy carried a box, which he placed on the table carefully before scurrying off again once Namjoon dismissed him.

The alpha smiled, jerking his head towards what the boy had brought. "Go on, Seokjin," he implored. "Open it."

Seokjin felt a little apprehensive, but he did as Namjoon asked. He hadn't really expected what he saw inside. It was the necklace that Namjoon had given him, that he had worn for their first and last night together. Seokjin had forgotten all about it, leaving it on the table beside Namjoon's bed once he'd left that night.

"I'm giving it back to you," Namjoon lifted his chin. "From Kim Namjoon to Kim Seokjin."

Does he think I am so low, that I can be bought with a mere trinket? Seokjin internally fumed, fingers curling around the purple necklace.

"I was wondering if you had kept it," the prince murmured.

"What else would I have done with it?" Namjoon asked, raising an eyebrow.

Seokjin shot him a look. "Burned it. Thrown it away. I don't know. I'd thought you wouldn't want to keep it."

Namjoon swallowed. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "I was upset," he began, sounding like the words pained him. "But I'm not anymore. I hope we can...move past all of that."

Seokjin tore his eyes away from the necklace, looking up at Namjoon's anxious face. "Then Kim Seokjin will accept it. This necklace and in a week's time, your mark."

Namjoon cleared his throat. "There's something I have to tell you about our wedding night," the alpha sounded even more nervous now. "Perhaps you can smell it, but I'll probably go into rut around then. The close proximity to an omega and all that."

"Right," Seokjin nodded his head like he understood.

"It was supposed to happen sooner but," Namjoon trailed off. He forced himself to smile. "Nevermind. That doesn't matter anymore."

Seokjin wondered if it was his own absence that had put off Namjoon's rut, the loss of the omega he'd been courting that put it on pause. If Namjoon was to go into rut, though, then -

"I'll go into heat," Seokjin realized, voice soft. His hands shook without his permission, the thought so very frightening because the only other heat he'd had had been a phantom one, a painful, frightening presentation of a heat. For some reason he had not thought passed the mark that was to be embedded in his neck, or even the consummation of his own marriage. If Namjoon mated him while in rut, then there was no helping it. Seokjin was still due for a heat. He'd bled, yet the heat had not come. Seokjin counted up the months in his head, realized that any day now, the smell of fertility should begin to stick to him.

Namjoon seemed a little surprised. "Really?" he asked, covering Seokjin's trembling hands in his own once more. He sounded slightly in awe as he began to speak very quickly. "I spoke with a few physicians. They told me it was better if you were in heat anyways, that the bonding would go a little easier if you did, especially considering our circumstances. They wanted to give you a prescription, but of course I refused! But who would know, that our cycles would already be so close?"

"Yes, who would know," Seokjin repeated faintly, in a daze at the information, at the realization. It made him feel a little sick.

It was all that came to mind now, the frightening haze of heat that was soon to take hold of him, and as Seokjin left the library with Namjoon's necklace clenched tight in one fist, he felt the demon flex across his back, wriggling and clawing at him.

How much of it is fake? How much of it is love? the demon crooned.

Seokjin looked down at the necklace in his hand. He could finally breathe now that he was not in Namjoon's presence.

He smiled in tandem with the smirk that spread across the fiery demon's face.

All fake, no love, he insisted.

The demon laughed.

Chapter End Notes

Jimin won't be involved with random alpha oc for very long!! just give me a few chapters to work through the tangled web that is vminkook! also what is the true identity of the demon (or is he even a demon at all) that has always been bothering seokjin ?

thank you for all of the lovely comments and kind words!!! and the wonderful kudos!! they are all so very appreciated. i am always constantly amazed at the positivity this fic gets!! 🥰

I will TRY to be better about responding to comments...i know that i have been lacking recently in that regards. i'm probably more likely to respond sooner to my [curiouscat](#) questions, so hit me up there if you want to be answered ASAP! 😊

as always, please follow me on [twitter](#)

! in the future i plan on having a poll that decides which ending you guys want to be incorporated into the main story! the other ending that's not chosen will just serve as a bonus chapter or side story.

next chapter: THE WEDDING!!!!

Matrimony & Mating

Chapter Summary

Seokjin and Namjoon marry and mate, yet unfortunate circumstances threaten their fledgling bond.

Chapter Notes

Tw: jealousy/possessiveness, smut, insecurity, struggles with infertility, miscarriage

if you follow me on twitter then :(... you will know what the last warning is referencing....



See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The ceremony itself was simple. It was all the pomp and circumstance, the grand gesture and symbolic nature of this occasion, that proved to be complicated. With nearly every noble in attendance, along with countless other foreign dignitaries, the hall in which Seokjin and Namjoon

were to be wed was packed. Or at least that was what Leah said she witnessed, face green as she recalled the dizzying scene Seokjin had asked her to relay back to him.

Jimin had done Seokjin's makeup earlier this morning, giving him a dramatic black line along each eyelid, dusted with smoky red eyeshadow. His lips were a dark red, and several times Seokjin caught himself wanting to lick or bite them due to nerves but he could not. It would stain his tongue or teeth red, and he could not afford to look like a fool.

Now that he knew more about his eventual audience, the desire to bite his lips grew. "How dreadful. Couldn't they have just stayed home? It's not that big of a deal."

False. It was the final subjugation of the imperialists, the union that cemented the new Kim king's rule with the only other Kim that might have had been able to challenge him.

Seokjin had vomited when he'd first woken up, bile splattering right into his chamberpot. His stomach had been tossing and turning since last night, a jumbled mess of nerves. Throwing up made him feel a little bit better, yet nothing could fix the queasiness that seeped into his bones, the uncertainty that plagued his every thought.

There would be no turning back after today. His fate would be set in stone.

Whenever Seokjin had taken the time to imagine his eventual wedding in his youth, it had never looked quite like this. He imagined settling down with an alpha woman, someone who could pretend to become pregnant in his place and then claim the child he bore as fruit of their own womb. It would not have worked if he married an alpha or beta male, or even another omega male. If he married an alpha or beta of the same sex then any children would reveal his own dynamic. If he married an omega then it would be nearly impossible for either of them to even conceive, each of their sperm counts incredibly low.

Yet here he was, dynamic revealed to the entire public, set to marry a man. An alpha. Namjoon. Seokjin couldn't help but wonder if his mother would be pleased that her plans were coming together so many years after they'd seemed lost. She'd bonded the two of them when they were mere boys, so she must have thought great things would come of their union.

Seokjin disagreed. He had given Namjoon his word that they might try to get along with each other, but it was easier said than done. Seokjin expected very little from his promise, knowing that his temper ran too hot, the betrayal he'd experienced cutting too deep. It would be hard to look Namjoon in the eye and pretend the other man's presence did not make him seethe.

The alpha had not even asked Seokjin if he wanted to marry him! He'd had someone else do it! This fact irritated Seokjin, made him realize that Namjoon was a coward in certain, small ways. Perhaps Namjoon was afraid of rejection, of Seokjin's anger. Yet the alpha should have swallowed that fear, should have insisted on hearing Seokjin's agreeance himself.

It was something Seokjin might always regret, how they had avoided each other so much up until their wedding. He felt not an ounce of eagerness or joy when it came to his nuptials here today.

Seokjin dreaded all of it: the parading, the private things that must be bared, fake pleasantries as each guest offered their congratulations, and finally the night that was to come, the dizzying heat that would finally be abated with the fangs that sank into Seokjin's neck, a lifetime promise of devotion, of ownership.

Around two months ago, it was something Seokjin yearned for, besotted as he was with Captain Joon. He could admit to himself now that the servant Jin would have loved to marry the alpha,

would have done so in a heartbeat.

How strange how quickly feelings could change.

“Are you sure about this hairpiece?” Ru asked, frowning. In her hands she held the gift from Lord Jeon, the golden circlet of dazzling metal and pearls.

Leah glanced over, fake peeking out from behind the white of Seokjin’s skirt that she’d been straightening. She raised an eyebrow. “It suits the dress,” she commented. “What’s wrong with it?”

Ru bit her lip, silent.

Jimin spoke in Seokjin’s place. “Lord Jeon gave it to Jin. If he wears it to the wedding, he’ll be sending a message of some sort. That he’s aligning himself with Lord Jeon or something else similarly horrible.”

Jimin ran a brush through Seokjin’s dark hair, tugging on it a little. “Do you really want to throw your lot in with that man?”

Seokjin smiled. “No, but it won’t quite hurt to let him think what he wants. I’m eager to see how much he might reveal to me if he thinks we’re on the same page.”

Leah made a noise in the back of her throat, shaking her head. “Um, what? It’s just a hairpiece! I don’t get it!”

“That’s alright, Leah. You don’t need to,” Seokjin assured her, spreading out his arms so that she could attend to his sleeves.

“So you’re going with the hairpiece?” Jimin murmured, disapproving.

Seokjin crooked a finger. “Bring it forward, Ru,” he said in lieu of an answer.

“The dress is so pretty!” Ru sighed, changing the topic as she set the hairpiece on the dresser. She clasped her hands together in front of her as she stared at it dreamily. “You said that seamstress managed to get all of it made in less than two weeks?”

Jimin nodded his head as he started to part Seokjin’s hair, making way for the hairpiece.

“She’s certainly skilled. I’ll have to consult her more often, maybe even bring her to the palace if she’d like,” Seokjin hummed happily.

“Aren’t you worried about the style, though?” Leah frowned. “It looks more like something you’d see at a royal Qing wedding than one of ours! What if it upsets people?”

Jimin’s fingers stilled his hair, and Ru averted her eyes. Their actions gave them away; clearly, the other two had had similar thoughts. Seokjin could only smirk.

“Let them! They can curse and sputter all they like, but none of it will matter. I will be the Imperial Consort,” Seokjin declared, holding his head up high, though each word was a knife, a stab to what little pride he had left.

A consort was nothing, truly. A consort could be replaced.

His friends murmured their assent to his words, though the worry in their eyes remained. Perhaps they sensed what sort of fate awaited the former Crown Prince. Seokjin took a deep breath, closing his eyes.

“I cannot fade to the background. If I lower myself to their level, then I will never climb back up,” he explained.

They would not let him. All of the familiar vultures, the snakes and spiders which were waiting for him. They were different from the scavengers that Seokjin was used to, born with nowhere near the benevolence of Adviser Paek, Lord Sam, or Lord Mun. These nobles were out for blood, salivating at just the thought of the former Crown Prince Seokjin brought so low.

No more words were exchanged as the other omegas readied him. The air had become tense in those last few minutes, and the queasiness of Seokjin’s stomach returned. He forced any bile down, not wanting to smear his makeup, and settled his left leg, which had started to bounce eagerly in trepidation.

At last they were done, and Seokjin stood in front one of the full length mirrors. He spun, white skirts twirling in tandem, and tilted his neck from one side to the next. A traditional choker had been locked around his neck, which Namjoon would take off during the ceremony. Jimin had done a wonderful job on his makeup, the foundation so thick that it covered Seokjin’s scar, and the hair was the perfect mixture of pristine and mussed, held in place with the hairpiece from Lord Jeon.

What really took his breath away, though, was the dress itself. The skirts and sleeves, even the main body piece of it - all appeared white. A few would criticize it, the color of mourning, but Seokjin knew what it represented in Western countries. Namjoon had studied in the West for a few years, so surely he would understand what Seokjin had wanted to convey. Threaded, swirling designs of gold decorated the overcoat and skirts of the gown, along with the layer underneath, which was a shocking red. The underskirts and chest piece that poked out were all embroidered in gold, flickering flames and swirls. Seokjin’s favorite part remained the golden phoenix that had been embroidered amongst the crimson silk, centered in the middle of his chest.

I am already a Kim, Seokjin had hoped it would remind others. *I have been a Kim, and I will always be a Kim, regardless of my marriage to your king.*

“You’re so beautiful!” Ru cried, eyes suspiciously wet.

“Those dumb nobles won’t even know what hit them!” Leah proclaimed.

Jimin’s hands rested on Seokjin’s shoulders as he stood behind him. His green eyes sparkled, his pink lips curling up into a shy, almost mysterious smile. Seokjin’s breath caught in his throat at the omega’s reflection. He closed his eyes and for a moment he could almost imagine Jae standing by his side, a younger, happier version of the omega.

“You’re dazzling,” Jimin said in his old mentor’s place, and just like that the vision vanished. “Don’t forget it!”

There was one final touch to the ensemble. Ru stood on the tips of her toes so that she could drape the veil over him, obscuring most everything from Seokjin’s view. “Remember,” Jimin murmured into his ears. “Fifty steps forward, then a bow.”

Seokjin’s lips twisted. “I don’t think I could forget,” he replied dryly.

He thought that Jimin might have shrugged, but he for sure knew that Ru and Leah were giggling. Already, though, he felt disoriented, and the urge to vomit rose again. Jimin’s hands rested on him once more, joined by Leah and Ru who took a hand of his into their own.

“We’ll tend to you during the feast. Let us know if you need anything, anything at all!”

Seokjin felt as if Jimin's words had somehow grounded him, stomach settling and mind clearing. His heart swelled, full of so many things he wished could tell them. "Thank you," he settled on saying, and that was enough.

Seokjin had feared he might have to drown out the noises, the music and the crowd that thundered and chattered as he made his entrance, and yet everything quieted. He proceeded slowly, cautiously, each footstep feeling like a heavy block of wood that clapped as he placed it down, but no noise was made.

As he came closer to the crowd, smelled all of their scents intermingled, close enough that he could see their black shadows on each side of him, he heard something. A gasp perhaps. One was followed by another, and soon there was murmuring, hushed whispers speaking to each other as if something scandalous had just happened.

The dress, Seokjin thought, arms straining as he held them in front of him. *Is that what has their feathers ruffled?*

He counted the steps in his head. 22, 23, 24, 25.

Halfway there. Seokjin paused.

A gong sounded. Something was announced.

He took a deep breath and continued. The whispers died off, perhaps accepting his attire. Now they waited to see what would happen next. Seokjin would not have been surprised if they were hoping for him to trip, fall on his face and embarrass himself. He wouldn't give them the satisfaction.

44, 45, 46, 47.

His footsteps felt even heavier, as if a shackle was winding itself around his ankles with each step. He swallowed the lump in his throat, bottom lip trembling, and willed his stomach to calm down. Seokjin wondered if his mother had been this nervous when she'd married his father.

More nervous and more angry, the dark voice cackled in his head. *He'd stolen something from her more precious than a crown.*

Just a few more steps, and he would be standing in front of Namjoon. Seokjin wanted so very desperately to scent the air, to make sure that he was close and that he had not embarrassed himself, but he did not. He moved forward, stopping at the fiftieth step, and bowed deeply to the shadow before him.

The ringing in his ears stopped Seokjin from hearing whatever was announced, but the next thing he knew, there were hands, grabbing hold of his red veil and flicking it up out of the way. The light burned his eyes for but a moment, and once they adjusted, he was looking at Namjoon.

The alpha smiled, perhaps to offer comfort to Seokjin, but there was something strained in his face. The alpha bit his lip and reached his wrist forward, brushing over the glands on Seokjin's neck as he pulled the collar off. Seokjin shivered at Namjoon's touch, at the intimate feel of his skin, something he had not felt in months.

Seokjin was supposed to offer his own wrist as well, rub it against the glands on Namjoon's neck, but he paused, taking a deep breath as the alpha's scent hit him full force. The smell of rut had become more potent, soaked so deep in Namjoon's skin that it must have dripped out as sweat. Seokjin made the mistake of looking at his eyes and very much wanted to keen right then and

there. It reminded him of the night they had spent together months ago, and sharp longing began to ache at the base of his spine.

Finally, Seokjin forced himself to move, actions jerky and perhaps too rough as he turned his hand over, wrist up, and ran it across the scent glands on his alpha's neck.

Namjoon's eyes rolled to the back of his head, his nostrils flaring, and one of his hands clamped down on Seokjin's wrist. It was obvious the alpha was using all of his willpower to hold back.

The same hands that scented each other came together, fingers intertwining, and the shaman began to tie a ribbon around their wrists, reciting the usual marriage vows. It was over in ten minutes, maybe even less, and at the end of it, they kissed.

It was supposed to be a brief, chaste thing, and yet Namjoon's hunger increased at the meeting of their lips. The kiss became more forceful and bruising than it perhaps should have been for a public setting. When Namjoon finally pulled himself away, Seokjin's lips were more red and swollen.

Seokjin turned away from his husband reluctantly, but not before he caught sight of a bead of sweat that ran down the alpha's forehead. Against his will, something similar to pity fluttered in his chest. Seokjin could not imagine being on the cusp of heat for this wedding; he did not envy Namjoon's situation.

The shaman announced them to the crowd, and the music started once more, drowning out the cheers and claps that erupted. Seokjin looked out at all of the strange faces, the enemies he did not recognize. He would not remember them when the day was over, so he did not even try.

He and Namjoon walked over, hand in hand, to the thrones that waited for them. They would have to accept well-wishes and presents now, before the feast was to take place. In Seokjin's opinion, this was the worst part of it.

Traditionally, the first ones to greet the newlywed couple were the in-laws, and yet there were no in-laws for either of them. Namjoon's parents were long gone, killed in the fire Seokjin's own father had set, and Seokjin's mother was lost to sickness, his father to poison.

But Namjoon had been fostered by Lord Woo. It was Lord Woo who led the procession, granddaughter Hyewon by his side. They were the last of the main Woo branch now that Seokjin had killed Beomseok the rapist.

Seokjin privately thought it was a blessing. The Woos were neither good-looking or talented. A waste of air if he'd ever seen it. Of course, there were smaller factions of them back at the Woo estate, minor distant cousins who were drooling for any parcel of land or gold they might be offered in return for their service. They were probably just waiting for Lord Woo to die off so that one of them might marry Hyewon and take it all.

Lord Woo bowed before the two of them, his daughter following suit. Seokjin's eyes narrowed at the sight of her, sniffing the strange smell in the air as they approached. There was something off, but he could not tell what.

"Congratulations, Your Majesty!" Lord Woo was positively beaming, as he greeted Namjoon. "You've fulfilled your duty!"

Seokjin could feel his hackles rise at Lord Woo's blatant disregard for his presence. He was the first to greet them, after all, so if this meant a precedent was being set - well! There was going to be

a problem.

Seokjin opened his mouth, about ready to demand attention from the Woo Clan, yet he felt Namjoon shift beside him. Before he knew it, the alpha was speaking.

“Thank you, Lord Woo. Now, won’t you greet your Imperial Consort as well?” Namjoon insisted, a rumbling warning in his voice.

Lord Woo balked, taken aback that the king would defend his soon-to-be mate. A petty feeling of victory swelled in Seokjin’s chest, and he felt like sticking his tongue out at the older man as he bowed to him, yet he refrained.

“Congratulations, Imperial Consort!” Lord Woo said stiffly. “I only hope that you can fulfill your duties as quickly as our king here!”

Seokjin nodded his head, smiling. “And what duties would those be?” he asked, though he clearly knew what it was Woo meant.

The old man sputtered, blinking rapidly. His face turned red and he finally said, “The duties of a consort, of course!”

Seokjin wanted to roll his eyes, but he felt his smile grow wider, digging into the sides of his face. “Ah, yes! How eloquently put, Lord Woo! I’ll be getting right to those duties tonight!”

Namjoon made a noise from beside them, disguising his laugh as a cough. “Well, Lord Woo! What tribute have you brought to us?”

Lord Woo gestured to his granddaughter, and Seokjin felt his stomach sink. “My lovely Hyewon,” Woo puffed his chest out. “As a personal attendant to your consort! She’ll be a step above the *common* servants you have employed now.”

Seokjin’s hackles rose. “Oh?” he began. “And what sort of experience does Hyewon have? Has she attended to any other noble omega before?”

Hyewon flushed, the poor thing, yet Seokjin could only feel so sorry for an unmated omega that came bare-necked to a wedding and fluttered her eyelashes at the groom.

“No,” Lord Woo admitted reluctantly. “But you’ll find that she is eager to learn - “

Eager to get close to me, to get close to Namjoon, Seokjin thought but did not say. He turned to Namjoon, eyes resembling daggers. Seokjin could not refuse such a thing. Lord Woo was not his ally, not his relation. Though the gift was meant for Seokjin, it was offered on Namjoon’s behalf. Only Namjoon could refuse it.

Already the harlots have come sweeping in, Seokjin realized, thoughts dark. *I haven’t even been married for an hour and yet they’re itching to spread their legs and bear their necks to my alpha. Disgraceful.*

“The sentiment is appreciated, Lord Woo,” Namjoon began, “but I’m afraid it’s unnecessary.”

Seokjin stilled, then relaxed at his husband's words. Namjoon would not meet his gaze, kept looking at Lord Woo and his granddaughter. “Seokjin already has enough attendants, and I would hate for your granddaughter to lose her rank. It’s very kind of you, but we cannot accept it.”

Lord Woo gaped for a second, before he recovered. He snapped his fingers and one of the servants

who had been waiting off to the side brought heavy sacks forward, dropping them down before the newlyweds with a thud. “Fine,” he said curtly. “Then you must accept my other tribute, yes? I can’t imagine you’ll find an excuse to accept pure gold, can you?”

“You’re too kind,” Namjoon accepted it without even blinking. He ran a thumb over the back of Seokjin’s hand. The king’s knee had begun to twitch.

Only one tribute, and he was becoming antsy.

Lord Woo and Hyewon left. Seokjin already glimpsed who was to be next, so he wasn’t blindsided when his brother approached, mate in tow.

Seokjin’s gaze skipped over his brother, settling on the infamous Jeon Jeongguk he had heard so much about. He took in the boy’s large, bright eyes and black hair, his round cheeks and bold stature. The boy was dressed in pretty pastels, mating bite hidden from view with a thick, golden collar around his delicate neck.

“Ah, the boy who was worth more to Taehyung than his own brother,” Seokjin greeted.

His words were the bland truth, and yet they seemed to physically stab at Taehyung’s mate, whose face twisted into a particularly unpleasant expression.

“Your Highness,” Jeongguk bowed, head lowered, though he raised his eyes to glance up at Seokjin and Namjoon, showing that he was not easily cowed. “I hope you will...take care of me in the future.”

“Likewise,” Seokjin said shortly, afraid that if he opened his mouth once more, venom would come spewing out.

He remembered what Taehyung had confided to him in the gardens. In Seokjin’s eyes, this omega before him had not been absolved of guilt. Seokjin wondered if he’d worked with his father to secure the bastard prince as a mate, or if Jeongguk had merely done so on his own whims, the naivete of a child that bubbled up inside clouding reason. He was young, about to turn nineteen. It was not that much of a stretch.

Whatever the case, Seokjin would not accept him. To do so was an insult not only to his brother but to his dearest friend - Jimin.

“Take care of my brother,” Taehyung lifted his head, meeting the king’s eyes. “He often forgets to take care of himself.”

Namjoon inclined his head, though his grip on Seokjin’s hand tightened. He looked upset for some reason which Seokjin could not fathom.

“I will do my best,” Namjoon eventually promised. “But Seokjin is stronger than he looks. You needn’t worry.”

Jeongguk fiddled with some of the embroidery on his sleeves. “We don’t have much to offer right now,” he admitted, sounding very shy and embarrassed, “but here!”

Jeongguk waved his hand, and a servant came forward with a chest. Once opened, several different dazzling objects were displayed. Hairpieces and earrings, necklaces and rings.

“They’re beautiful,” Namjoon nodded his head, speaking for Seokjin whose words had failed him. “Thank you, Jeongguk. Prince Taehyung.”

Seokjin wished he could place the emotion in Namjoon's voice, the unspoken things the alpha wanted to say. He wanted to ask, yet there was no time. The next tribute was to be offered, and the two would have not be alone until after the feast was over.

Yoongi came with his cousin Duran by his side. They offered silk and land to the king. "An inheritance for your firstborn son," Duran chimed in unhelpfully, ignoring the sharp look Yoongi sent her way.

"How thoughtful!" Seokjin commented. He let go of Namjoon's hand, uncomfortable.

Next was the Jung Clan. Lord Jung, his alpha daughter, and his son General Jung. They were talented soldiers, yet now that the fighting was over, their clan promised to focus on security and protection. A renewal of the oath they had surely spoken at Namjoon's coronation. General Jung came forward, eyes dancing as he offered Seokjin a box.

Inside was a black dagger, embedded at the hilt with blood red rubies. "In case our guards or even Namjoon himself is not there to protect you," he insisted.

Namjoon's voice sounded gruff, gruffer than Seokjin had ever heard it. "He'll take it, but he won't need it," the alpha's hands clenched on the armrests of his throne. "Nobody will ever touch him."

Seokjin shivered at the unspoken threat to Namjoon's words, at the thick smell in the air. Four tributes down, yet hundreds more to go. Seokjin had to pretend that Namjoon wasn't there, taking deep breaths through his mouth, not allowing himself to smell the alpha's musk. Already his stomach clenched, filled with the dripping need that grew in response to the smell. His alpha was in rut. It was a natural reaction.

Soon I'll be in heat, Seokjin thought as he finished thanking Lady Hae for the lovely painted artifacts she had offered.

But it was strange. He'd become slightly aroused, yes, but there was no haze building in his mind, no aching pain in his gut. Seokjin pushed his worry aside. He had little experience when it came to heats. He'd just have to wait and see. Everything would be just fine.

Eventually, nobles that Seokjin did not recognize arrived in front of them. They were Bangtan rebels that Namjoon knew instantly, yet Seokjin struggled to stick names to faces. Especially when one right after another they filed in, each one more plain-faced and similar to the last.

Then something strange happened. Seokjin started to recognize people. He saw faces that jabbed at his memory, remembered quivering forms that cowered in his father's shadows.

Ah, he realized at last. These are the imperialists, the pockets of them that had been hidden in their estates when the Uprising happened.

Song. Ryuk. Just a few of the names he remembered, the minor noble families whose lack of presence had allowed them to feign sickness and withdraw from court when the mad king's madness was at its worse.

Song came first, looking so overwhelmed that he might cry. "Oh, Seokjin!" he addressed the consort familiarly, as if he might cry. "You look so much like your mother. Why, I remember her wedding like it was just yesterday!"

The last name Song was all he knew, so Seokjin was not lying when he expressed ignorance. "I'm sorry," he began uncertainly. "Who are you?"

Song's face fell. His wife prodded at him anxiously, while the seven or so of his grown children twittered about behind them. "It's me, Song Hwa!"

Seokjin blinked.

"I was at your father's court until your thirteenth year? Surely you must remember me!" Song tried again.

"Mister Song," Seokjin began, perhaps a little cruelly as he purposefully forgot whatever title it was this man had, "I'm sorry, but I'm afraid I don't. That was what - over eleven years ago?"

"I managed Adviser Paek's lands! I was given land by the Yi River!"

Seokjin merely frowned.

"Do you have a tribute, Baron Song?" Namjoon spoke up. His voice was no longer kind, but tinged with irritation. "If not I'm afraid you'll have to move along."

Song ducked his head, thoroughly humbled at the callousness from both the king and the consort. One of his sons offered them their tribute, pleasant oils and spices arranged neatly in a basket. The Song family started to make their exit, downtrodden and sullen, when Seokjin snapped his fingers in the direction of the patriarch.

"Ah!" Seokjin interjected, as if he had some sort of epiphany. "Song Hwa, I remember now!"

Song looked up, hopeful, and then -

"Smallpox!" Seokjin smiled. "You were all struck with a terrible, life-threatening case of the pox weren't you?"

All of Song's hopes came crashing down at the reminder of his cowardice, at the lie he had told for so long. He paled and lowered his head once more, but Seokjin had not finished.

"I must say - you all look rather good for having survived that sort of disease. Why, not a scratch or scar on any of you!" he said rather cheerfully, viciously. "You /must/ let me in on your secret."

Song nodded his head, scurrying off with his tail between his legs, properly chastised.

Why wasn't it you? that died Why didn't Lord Mun or even Adviser Paek survive instead? Seokjin thought glumly, ignoring the worried look that Namjoon sent his way.

They may be your only allies, the rational side of him reminded. *It would do good to play nice.*

Yet they are cowards, too afraid to face a crazed king's wrath. How could i even hope to rely on them for support in an uprising of my own?

Though they called themselves imperialists, and they had somehow proven a struggle for Namjoon in establishing himself as king, they were nothing more than fools. Seokjin didn't particularly care if they had supported his claim in the past year since the Uprising, if they did even still. He hated them instantly, and his dislike led to a burning desire to never see them again.

The imperialists were not the only familiar faces he saw. When it finally came to the foreign dignitaries that had made it to this occasion, one of Seokjin's old friends smiled back at him.

"Chanyeol!" Seokjin greeted the First Prince of Qing warmly, eyes lighting up.

Chanyeol looked taller and broader, yet relatively the same, with dark hair and dark eyes. He'd started to grow a beard, which Seokjin thought made him look a little silly. The alpha was dressed more casually than Seokjin had ever seen him, perhaps an attempt to appear nonthreatening to the guests here.

"When I first received your invitation, I almost thought it was a joke! I mean, the infamously picky Seokjin? Finally settling down?" Chanyeol laughed.

Seokjin shrugged his shoulders lightly. "What can I say, this one grew on me."

The omega was caught off guard when Namjoon reached his hand over, clamping it down over Seokjin's own. "You know the Crown Prince of Qing?" Namjoon asked, sounding sour and annoyed.

"He visited often when we were younger," Seokjin explained. "He even studied here for a year, I think. It was supposed to strengthen ties between our countries."

"Our fathers were hoping for a marriage," Chanyeol needlessly elaborated. Seokjin wished he could have told him to shut up. Chanyeol's eyes were sparkling; it seemed he knew exactly what he was doing.

"But that didn't happen. We were ill-suited for each other," Seokjin said, hoping to finish their journey down memory lane. Namjoon's coming out would make him testy and irrational. Seokjin hoped to avoid any confrontation that might come of that, especially with someone as important as Chanyeol.

"I feel so foolish," Chanyeol sighed. "We were so close, and yet I never knew you were an omega."

Namjoon tensed, but Seokjin squeezed his hand, hoping to appease him with his touch.

"I happen to recall you wanted to make me your - what was it - fifth concubine? No, thank you. Though you were under the impression I was a beta, I still could not stomach that sort of insult. I was the Crown Prince of my own country, yet fifth concubine was the best you could do for me? Besides, your first consort would have driven me out in less than a week, I think," Seokjin narrowed his eyes, remembering things differently than the prince before him.

"Yes, Baekhyun is a terror, isn't he?" Chanyeol mused, absolutely besotted.

"Your tribute," Namjoon nearly spat out the words. "You do have one, don't you?"

Chanyeol grinned. "But of course!"

There was a rustling sound, a frantic squawking that had everyone except Chanyeol and his party confused. Whispers began to consume the hall, everyone commenting on the strange parcel that First Prince Chanyeol of Qing had brought. It was covered in a light brown tarp, which Chanyeol unveiled with a flourish, revealing the hidden tribute.

"For the Imperial Consort," he declared, bowing. "A koel to follow along with all those pretty songs you like to sing."

Seokjin stared at the koel, fluttering around in its metal cage. He admired the bird's glossy feathers, which were a sort of royal blue, and thought of the pretty songs that Chanyeol had brought up.

"I haven't sang in so long," the omega remarked, flushing. "I'm afraid your gift will outsing me!"

The last time had been with Yoongi, the both of them trapped inside the palace because of a terrible snowstorm. Yoongi had accompanied Seokjin's singing by playing the guzheng they'd found buried in the old queen's things.

"You sing?" Namjoon asked, a little indignant, taken aback.

At his husband's inquiry, Seokjin closed off. "It was a long time ago," he insisted.

"I also have a few swords for your alpha, made by the finest blacksmith Qing has to offer," Chanyeol added.

Namjoon's grip turned bone crushing, and the scent in the air turned borderline hostile. Thankfully, Chanyeol still seemed amused by it. "Thank you for your gifts," Seokjin murmured.

Once Chanyeol and his attendants had moved on, Namjoon leaned over, nose brushing against Seokjin's cheek. "He courted you," Namjoon growled, a statement not a question.

"It lasted less than a month," Seokjin huffed. "I don't know why you're worried."

"If some other alpha touched my omega, of course I'd be worried," Namjoon insisted, eyes dark.

Seokjin shivered and planted his hand to Namjoon's chest, pushing him away gently. "Calm down, Joon," he murmured. "People are watching."

Namjoon scowled, but he leaned back in his seat with a huff. His fingers tapped along the edges of his throne, and the restless energy did not leave him, even once they had finished accepting tributes and moved onto the dining hall.

The food smelled delicious, and there was so much of it! Yet Seokjin's stomach was still a ball of nerves, so he only nibbled on a few pieces of meat, afraid that if he ate any more he might vomit again. He reached forward for his cup of wine, leaning it this way and that, watching as the dark red liquid swirled.

"Is the wine not to your taste?" Namjoon asked suddenly, the first words since they had started eating.

Seokjin's throat burned as he remembered the sour taste of the last wine he had drunk, the nails that bit into his throat, squeezing and choking him so that he might swallow the poison down. He set the cup down. "No," he admitted quietly. "Not anymore."

Namjoon stared at him, as if he could see through him. He reached forward, one hand grabbing Seokjin's, the other taking his own cup in hand. Namjoon threw it back, finishing the wine with one gulp. His husband wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"See? No poison here," he muttered, almost to himself. His eyes were dark, pupils expanded.

Seokjin retracted his hand and looked away, shifting in his seat anxiously.

There was music going on, some drums and strings being played, covering the chatter of all the guests gathered before them. Seokjin's gaze swept over them. He spotted his brother first, seated at the Jeon table next to his mate. Taehyung had more color to his face, his eyes brighter, and yet it seemed he had stolen the energy from his mate, who appeared more sour and lethargic than when the omega had greeted Seokjin. Jeongguk was nodding his head to whatever his brother was

saying, gaze unfocused. Though Seokjin was quite a few feet away, he could tell that there remained a distance between Taehyung and Jeongguk still, an awkward unease.

Off to the left were their exact opposites. Yoongi and General Jung seemed to be having the time of their lives, giggling and pawing at each other, already drunk off of wine by the third course. Seokjin narrowed his eyes, heart twinging at the sight. They were not the only ones in a good mood. Most of the occupants seemed to be celebrating, laughing and even dancing as they drank to King Namjoon's health and Imperial Consort Seokjin's fertility.

Seokjin clenched his hands into fists, and he couldn't help but tremble. His chest felt tight. How nice it must be to be happy on one's own wedding day.

Usually the wedding feast lasted for hours, the couple only retiring together late into the night. Yet Namjoon seemed to have been pushed past his limits, for after only an hour, he stood to address the crowd.

"My consort and I shall be retiring. Thank you for joining on us on this auspicious day and please, feel free to continue celebrating," the alpha declared, voice strained.

Seokjin stood as well, but he had barely managed to push himself out of his seat before Namjoon was stalking off. Seokjin's left eye twitched, but he gathered his skirts and followed after him.

A pair of servants held the doors open until Seokjin exited as well. When they finally shut behind him, Seokjin allowed himself to call out. "Namjoon! Namjoon, slow *down*!"

His husband whirled around, the expression on his face nearly feral. Namjoon's eyes were liquid gold, narrowed into slits as his nostrils flared, scenting the air. "It's taking me a lot to restrain myself," the alpha admitted through clenched teeth. "So, please do not test my patience. Unless you want us to consummate our marriage right here in this hallway, that is."

Seokjin frowned, a little cowed by Namjoon's ferocity, yet he could not help but speak up, "How am I testing your patience? I just wanted you to wait for me."

Namjoon did not answer, just turned away with a huff and strode off. At first, Seokjin wasn't sure where he was going, since he was headed in the opposite direction of his quarters. Then it hit him, that they were going to Seokjin's own quarters.

Seokjin flushed, feeling a little silly. Of course. It was tradition. Any couplings were to be done in the consorts' rooms, so that the king could come and go as he pleased.

When they finally arrived, Namjoon glared at the guards who stood a few feet away, keeping watch over the consort's chamber. "I don't care if Qing soldiers are about to storm the city gates or Lord Woo has choked on his dessert. You will not disturb us. Is that clear?"

The guards remained stone faced as they nodded their heads in affirmation, though Seokjin noticed that one's hands were shaking. After they acknowledged their orders, Namjoon turned back, grabbing Seokjin's wrist and pushed the door to his chambers open. He tugged him inside, and suddenly the smell of him was so much stronger, more potent and thick up close like this. The door shut behind them with a thud, and then the pair of them were alone.

It was dark in Seokjin's chambers, their only source of light being the candles that were spread around the room. Namjoon stared at him, his eyes nearly black in the dark, and he let go of Seokjin's hand. He took off his glove, reaching out slowly, hesitantly to touch Seokjin's cheek.

"I'm sorry," he grunted, sounding like the apology pained him a little. "If I've been...less than

gentle. If I've acted childish. It's just..."

The alpha trailed off, unable to finish his sentence. He looked away, beginning to retract his hand as he took a deep breath.

Seokjin reached over, kept his hand in place. "It's fine," he murmured. "I can smell it on you. The rut. It's supposed to make alphas do crazy things, right?"

Namjoon smiled, and it looked a little more ferocious than he'd probably intended. "Then will you forgive me if I treat you roughly?"

Seokjin shivered and closed his eyes, the aching need rumbling in his stomach. His affections for Namjoon were gone, had vanished in an instant, and yet still his body craved for the alpha, yearned for the touch and taste of him.

"I think I would be very displeased if you didn't, dear husband," Seokjin replied, fluttering his eyelashes as he opened his eyes.

Namjoon leaned forward, and their lips met, this kiss somehow even messier than the one at their wedding. Namjoon pressed against him, arms crowding around Seokjin's waist, and as they parted, the alpha went for his neck.

"So pretty," Namjoon panted against the delicate skin, nibbling here and there. "I saw you, took off that veil, and gods, the heat became ten times worse than it already was. I felt like my body was on fire. Wanted to take you right then and there. Rip your pretty clothes off of you."

Seokjin threw his head back, allowing Namjoon to properly decorate his neck. He let out a whine at the thought of it, his inner omega so pleased at being wanted by their alpha. "So what's stopping you now?"

Namjoon hoisted him up, and Seokjin wrapped his legs around the man's waist. Namjoon carried him over to the bed, then unceremoniously threw him on top of it. "You obviously don't remember how much a knot hurts, do you?" the alpha hummed.

Seokjin squirmed anxiously as Namjoon then set to work, carefully peeling the dress off of him, having regained some of his self-control. The omega had to laugh, eyes hooded as the arrogant smirk spread across his face. "Your knot is nothing!" he scoffed, liking the way that Namjoon's eyes narrowed.

The alpha reached down, pinching the softness at Seokjin's hip. "You didn't think that when you were crying over it," he reminded Seokjin, who flushed at the memory.

Namjoon looked down at Seokjin's waist, a puzzled look on his face which faded into wonder as he sucked in a deep breath, pupils blown. He returned his attentions to Seokjin's waist, grabbing and squeezing it with a bruising grip. Seokjin frowned at the sudden attention there, and he turned his head away, unable to meet Namjoon's eyes. He felt self-conscious, as if something was wrong with his body, and he wanted to cover himself back up. A moment later, however, Namjoon's words erased all of his doubt.

"You've been eating well," Namjoon remarked almost reverently.

Seokjin felt the tips of his ears go red, and though perhaps he should have felt a little insulted at what that statement might mean, especially as Namjoon looked down at his nearly bare body, he knew Namjoon meant it as a good thing. He had certainly filled out these last few months, his appetite returning steadily, bit by bit, and his efforts paid off. He'd regained some of the weight he

had lost since entering the palace as a servant.

“I’ve had delicious food to eat,” Seokjin explained, flustered. “Of course I would eat well.”

“I’m glad,” Namjoon murmured, voice warm. “I want you to be happy, Seokjin. Happy and healthy.”

With that, the alpha ripped what little undergarments remained. Seokjin felt himself trembled, and he tried to close his legs shut, to hid himself in the little ways that he could, but Namjoon would not allow it. The alpha took a deep breath, nostrils flaring. “Gods, I can’t - “

He seemed to be struggling, to be waging war within himself. Seokjin could see it, could understand the haze that must come and go. He remembered bits and pieces of his own heat, the cloud that covered memories and reason as it filled his head with one thought and one thought only.

To mate.

Seokjin swallowed the lump in his throat, feeling as if his chest was too tight suddenly, as if it might cave in from just one touch. That was what they were here to do, the final piece to all of this grand ceremony. Seokjin wondered if it would hurt too terribly, the feel of teeth in his neck.

They were here to become mates. It was the only reason Namjoon touched him now, nearly consumed by rut, weighed down by responsibility. They both had a duty: Namjoon to fuck and bite him, Seokjin to conceive.

Seokjin reached up, threading his fingers through Namjoon’s soft hair, noting the sweat that ran down his brow. “It’s ok, Joon,” he murmured, words rough and dry on his tongue. “You can let go.”

Namjoon looked at him, meeting his gaze for perhaps the second time all day. Seokjin saw it as it happened, as his eyes clouded over, murky and lost. The rut consumed him, and then he was moving, hands reaching between the sensitive place between Seokjin’s legs as his mouth began to lavish kisses to Seokjin’s chest, biting and licking every trace of visible skin.

Seokjin moaned at the attention, and he felt himself clench around nothing as Namjoon paid more mind to his small, leaking cock, rough hand wrapping around it and forcing him to complete hardness.

“Joon,” he muttered, a little impatient as he wiggled his hips. Because it felt nice and all but he wanted those fingers inside of him. “That’s not important. You’re not - “

Namjoon only grunted, not minding whatever it was Seokjin had been trying to say. He paused, touch retracting as he shimmied out of his own clothes, and then resumed what he’d been doing.

Soon he moved down Seokjin’s body and the next thing Seokjin knew, his cock was completely enveloped in a wet heat. The omega yelped in surprise, and his hands moved to Namjoon’s hair, fingers twisting in it. It was the first time that Namjoon had ever used his mouth on him *there*.

Something in his chest fluttered. It didn’t take very long for him to come, especially when Namjoon finally, finally sank one of his fingers inside of him. Seokjin came with a moan, throwing his head back against the pillows as he bucked his hips, yanking on Namjoon’s hair.

Namjoon came back up, licking his lips, and pressed a kiss to the edge of Seokjin’s jaw. He added another finger, and Seokjin let out a low hiss, which Namjoon swallowed in another messy kiss,

licking and biting at the omega's lips until they were swollen and red, smearing the makeup off to the side of his mouth.

It took less time than the first for Namjoon's fingers to stretch him. Seokjin thought it might have something to do with his own body, which still remembered the alpha's touch like it was yesterday. Seokjin, when he was younger, had been told to expect no sort of prep whatsoever. Jae had told him that if he ever slept with an alpha, in rut especially, they would be quick to shove their way inside. So it was very telling of Namjoon, that even while in rut he would seek to take care of his omega before himself.

Seokjin moaned as two fingers became three, thrusting in and out, stretching him in order to accommodate what was to come. Seokjin felt himself rock back against Namjoon's fingers, pressure building in his stomach as he let out little pants, refusing to meet the alpha's hungry gaze.

"Joon!" Seokjin cried. "Please, just -"

He trailed off as the fingers disappeared, as the warmth that was building in his core suddenly collapsed. He clenched on nothing, hollow and empty.

"Joon. What?" Seokjin called out, confused, because why wasn't he being filled?

And then, oh.

Oh.

Namjoon's hands were on his hips, positioning him, lifting him up, then one of them disappeared and a sharp pain blinded him as Namjoon eased his way inside. Seokjin gasped, the breath knocked out of him as his hands fisted in the bedsheets. Once Namjoon was inside of him, the alpha began to move quickly, thrusting deep inside of him. Seokjin was overwhelmed by the sensations, as Namjoon didn't let up even once. He just continued to fuck into him, like it was all he could think of.

It probably was, given the rut.

That awful creature inside of him purred, his omega pleased that Namjoon found his scent suitable while in rut, that he liked the taste and feel of him. Namjoon grunted, huffing as he mouthed at Seokjin's neck.

In an instant, a thousand different emotions ran through Seokjin's mind, different scents and pictures. Everything was...whole, suddenly, as if everything made sense, as if they were meant to be this way, clicking into place. Seokjin realized dimly, mind fuzzy that suddenly his neck was hurting.

He felt something wet inside of him, something hot, and then suddenly it was growing, that familiar thickness that could only be Namjoon's knot. When the alpha pulled away from Seokjin's neck, his mouth was dripping with blood. The alpha licked his lips, eyes glinting, and Seokjin felt so happy for a second that he thought he may cry. He told himself it was just pheromones, but his chest continued to ache without his permission.

Seokjin should have known that it would not last, because a second later, Namjoon's brow was furrowing. The alpha muttered something, and Seokjin noticed his face twisted into a frown. His hands pawed at Seokjin's side and he soon cried out with a whine, "No heat?"

It felt like a stone had dropped in Seokjin's stomach, settling with a vicious thud. Though he was filled, tied tight to his alpha and covered in warmth, something felt so very hollow in that moment,

when he realized his own body had failed him.

Even Namjoon in his rut had noticed, yet Seokjin had put it to the back of his mind, had not given it any thought. Namjoon, however, was not as frantic as Seokjin at the realization and he nuzzled his face back into the crook of Seokjin's neck, laying on top of the omega as his eyes fluttered shut.

Why did I not go into heat? Seokjin thought suddenly. What's wrong with me?

It came to him without warning, the whispered words he'd tried so hard to forget, what he'd overheard at Yerin's brothel when he'd been under.

"But there's not much I can say for his fertility. He's taken too many suppressants for far too long," the doctor who had betrayed him to Mun Kai had murmured.

I traded my fertility to live a few years of lies. And what good are those lies, now that they have failed me?

Seokjin's eyes stung, and he had to close them so that the tears would not fall. He knew what was expected of him, what had been wished for and toasted on all throughout the day. Seokjin had one main duty now. He needed to provide Namjoon with a son, preferably an alpha. If he could not do that then -

It will be just as I feared. He will look for someone else.

Seokjin reached out, and his inner wrist settled on Namjoon's neck. He stared at the golden phoenix scrawled across the skin there, almost wrapped around the gland in Namjoon's neck. He sniffled, a little overwhelmed, and leaned his face forward, tucking his nose in the junction between shoulder and neck. Seokjin took a deep breath, then another and another again. As he scented Namjoon, he couldn't pretend that the action did not affect him. He'd wanted so desperately to properly scent this alpha, had wanted to leave a mark on him and make him his. Even now his teeth ached, a sort of pain settling in his gums as the desire to tear into Namjoon's gland grew. He'd never wanted anything that bad before. He realized this with a sort of frightening clarity, and his hands, which he had wrapped around Namjoon's shoulders, started to tremble.

Because you are his, so you want him to be yours. True bonds go both ways. They're mutual. Exclusive.

It was surely Namjoon's presence in Seokjin's own skin messing with him, the scent of Namjoon on his neck and in his cunt that made him this needy and ridiculous. He told himself this and almost believed it.

Namjoon let out a sort of whimper, as if he could hear Seokjin's bitter thoughts. Seokjin hushed him, hands coming up to play with his alpha's hair, and he moved without even thinking, pressing a soft kiss to Namjoon's phoenix, before ultimately removing his face from the other man's neck.

"It's nothing, Joon," Seokjin murmured. He felt the alpha's knot shift inside him, bumping against his walls. "Nothing at all."

After the haze of the rut disappeared, along with whatever post-coital softness had remained, Namjoon turned stiff. The need to mate had been abated, followed by the proper fucking of his omega, and so Namjoon's rut lasted only a few hours, long enough for his knot to die down. As it did, the worry that plagued Seokjin seemed to finally hit Namjoon. The alpha rustled around, waking Seokjin in the middle of the night, who let out a whine, reaching out blindly for the warmth that had left him.

“Joon,” Seokjin slurred, rubbing his eyes. “What’s the matter?”

The alpha was already dressing himself, throwing clothes back on as if he were in a hurry to get somewhere. He slowed at Seokjin’s question, turning around to give the omega a strained smile. “Sorry,” he murmured. “It just seems I’ve overstayed my welcome.”

The words rose a red flag immediately, and Seokjin sat up, confused. “What are you talking about?”

“You told me you were due for a heat,” Namjoon said matter-of-factly. “You didn’t go into heat.”

Seokjin flushed and he hunched in on himself. He drew the blanket closer, a feeble attempt to hide his naked, vulnerable body from the coldness in both the air and Namjoon’s eyes. “There must be a reason for that,” Seokjin muttered. “I took suppressants for the longest time. Perhaps my cycles are just a little strange.”

“You’ve been recovering from suppressants for nearly a year now,” Namjoon said quietly. “You even told me you thought you would go into heat, but you didn’t. Surely you must see what this means?”

Seokjin’s neck ached, twinging with pain. He wanted to let out a whine, to ask his mate why he was being so cruel, yet he kept his silence, mouth twisting into an unhappy frown.

Namjoon sighed, closed his eyes. He finished buttoning his shirt. “I don’t think we’ll be very compatible, Seokjin,” he admitted. “If you couldn’t even go into heat when I was in rut, then…”

Seokjin shook his head, blinking rapidly to stop the wetness that had gathered in his eyes. “

“Don’t worry, Seokjin. I won’t abandon you. Not like your brother’s done to Jeongguk. This just means it’s something we have to work on, yeah?” Namjoon sounded so tired, so disappointed and worn out.

He’s disappointed in me, Seokjin realized, feeling hollow. We haven’t even been married a full day and already I’ve displeased him.

“Alright,” the omega agreed, if only so that Namjoon might leave, so that he might cry alone. “We’ll work on it.”

Wrong, wrong, wrong. We don’t need to work on anything! Something within Seokjin screamed. *Don’t let mate leave, don’t let him go!*

Namjoon paused, eyes resting on the mark on Seokjin’s neck. He opened his mouth, then closed it. The alpha rubbed his own neck nervously. “Sleep well, Seokjin,” he muttered, before he turned to leave.

How can I sleep well without you? Seokjin thought but did not say. He merely curled up within his blankets. The omega buried his nose deep inside so that he could still smell Namjoon, so that it seemed as if the alpha was still there by his side. The mark on his neck ached, as if proving Namjoon’s words right - that they weren’t compatible, that they wouldn’t be able to bond properly.

Yet in the morning the mark had turned a dark pink, and it already appeared to be scabbing over.

“What does it mean?” Seokjin asked Jimin quietly, fiddling with his sleeves as the other omega brushed his hair that morning. “Why couldn’t I go into heat? Is there something wrong with me?”

Jimin merely frowned and shook his head. "I don't know, Seokjin," he murmured. "I really don't."

It took three days for Seokjin to understand his shortcomings, to learn just why it was he did not go into heat like he was supposed to.

"It's common in the first three months not even to smell it," Jimin told him in a quiet voice, filled with too much emotion for Seokjin to bear. "Because that's when it's easiest to lose them. It's supposed to be a way of protecting the omega, because if they lose it and their mate finds out about it - well, it won't be good for the omega, will it?"

Seokjin smelled the blood in the air, saw it on his hands and thighs, but he didn't really understand it. He heard Jimin's words, but they didn't seem like the other omega was talking to him. It was as if he were telling a story or talking about someone else, because why would Seokjin need to know all of this?

It didn't make any sense.

"My lower back hurt," Seokjin remarked softly, sounding helpless. "There were cramps...only cramps. It's my usual bleeding, Jimin."

Jimin took a deep, shaky breath, had to gather his composure as he swallowed the cry that threatened to burst forth. "You didn't go into heat, Jin," he reminded him painfully, eyes squeezed shut, "since you last bled. It...it makes sense now why you didn't go into heat when Namjoon was in rut."

Seokjin shook his head. "No," he murmured. "No, there's no way!"

He did the math in his head, though, and it added up. He'd slept with Joon two months ago. It wouldn't be too much of a stretch...

He'd even thrown up every now and then these last few weeks, writing it off as nothing more than nerves or caused by the sudden return of his appetite, which had come back without his notice. Seokjin had waved that off as simply overcoming his trauma. Nothing more, nothing less, yet it seemed like his body had a mind of its own, preparing in vain for that which Seokjin was unaware of.

Jimin pressed on, insistent. "You *couldn't* have gone into heat. You were already pregnant!"

Were. Was. Had been.

He wasn't pregnant anymore. Seokjin heaved, breaths coming out of him like loud, wheezing sounds. He had to put his hands down, had to tear his gaze away from the damning evidence of his failure, of the bright red blood that ran down his thighs, the massacred remainder of his child.

He let out a cry before he even knew what he was truly doing, a horrible, gut-wrenching sound, the sound of an omega mourning their baby.

"Jimin! Jimin!" he sobbed, the tears hot against his cheeks. "What is this? How did it happen?"

"It happens sometimes," Jimin bit his lip, face grey. "It's ok. It doesn't mean anything, Seokjin! It's more likely than you think."

Seokjin turned this way and that as his bloody hands clutched at his bedsheets, looking for something to hold on to, and so many thoughts ran through his mind. At the moment, he knew he

should be grateful. He was not ready for a child. Neither was Namjoon. This was the best thing to happen to them; it seemed as if Mother Nature was looking after them. But the irrational part of him was struck with grief, with what could have beens and maybes. He thought of a baby - his baby - with Namjoon's golden eyes and dimples and a beautiful phoenix scrawled somewhere across its skin.

He knew that Namjoon would have been a good father, even if he didn't particularly like Seokjin, he would have treated their baby well. And yet-

Seokjin looked down at the blood again, looked to Jimin and sucked in a deep breath. "He can't know, Jimin!" he insisted fervently. "Please! He can not know. If he knows this, I'm done for! We're done for. He'll be so angry."

Useless, useless, useless. Seokjin wondered if Namjoon would think he had murdered their own child, if he would hate him even more for this failure. There was no mistaking what alphas did with omegas who miscarried, tossing them aside in favor a new, more fertile mate.

He will take Hyewon or even Min Duran, Seokjin thought frantically. He will replace me.

Jimin had already begun to gather the dirtied towels he'd used to wipe Seokjin's legs, but he paused at Seokjin's words, swearing. Seokjin began to beg, pleading with him.

"Hush!" Jimin snapped. "Just let me think!"

Seokjin himself could not think very well in this moment, could only cry and whine. He wanted his alpha here with him, wanted to nuzzle his face into Namjoon's neck and curl up beside him. He never wanted to leave. But he knew that he could not see Namjoon, not for a while, not until the blood disappeared, both from the air and the sheets.

Finally, Jimin took a deep breath and said, "It'll be mine."

Seokjin jerked, staring at the other omega, red-rimmed eyes wide as saucers.

"My bleeding," Jimin elaborated. "And if anyone questions me on it, if they can smell that it's different? Then it will be my miscarriage."

Seokjin sniffled, shaking his head. "No, Jimin! You shouldn't have to do that! Not for me!"

"It's fine," Jimin insisted. He gave a wobbly smile. "It won't matter. Former gisaeng, remember? It's not like I had much of a reputation anyway."

"No!" Seokjin refused. "I don't want you to help me like this. Not if it's going to hurt you!"

"Then what else do you suggest?" Jimin snapped. He pointed a finger towards the door. "Because when I leave this room, arms full of bloodied rags and bedsheets, there's going to be hundreds of eyes watching my every move. *Someone* is going to see me eventually. When they do, they're going to start asking questions and the first target is going to be you."

Seokjin closed his mouth, looking away from Jimin's stern gaze. His friend was right, yet Seokjin wanted nothing but for him to be wrong.

Jimin grabbed his hand, squeezing it tightly. "It's okay. This tells us a few good things, you know. You're not broken. You and Namjoon *are* probably compatible. You just couldn't go into heat because of this baby. You will now. And you *can* have a baby. You told me before that you were worried about conceiving, right? Well, don't worry anymore. You can!"

Seokjin sniffled, closing his eyes. He allowed himself to be reassured by Jimin's words. He let himself think that Jimin was right. Jimin - who had seen many pregnancies and miscarriages and births in the gisaeng house where he lived all of his life - surely would know what he was talking about.

In the year that followed, Seokjin lost two more.

Chapter End Notes

oh no...Jin...

:(

i have promised the readers who follow me on Twitter, so now i will promise all of you: the miscarriages that have been mentioned, three in total, will be the only ones. they may be mentioned by jin in future chapters, but it will only be in passing, nowhere near as detailed as this one.

in regards to where the story is heading -

the focus for the next couple chapters or so will be on vminkook, repairing and establishing a relationship there. namjin will briefly fade to the background and their relationship will experience a time skip of sorts!! that does not mean that things are not happening behind the scenes or within these next few chapters, because they ARE, just that they will be less central! after i finish getting vminkook where it needs to be, the namjin content will resume full force :P the Consort Arc may finish sooner than the last one, but we will definitely end things off with namjin in a better place so to speak!! ;)

omg, i feel like i haven't updated in forever for some reason? so i'm really grateful to get this chapter out finally!!

thank you to everyone who has left comments and kudos, who has bookmarked this story or just subscribed to it!! Rising Sun is so close to 1000 kudos and i am SO happy with all the love that had been given to my story, which i like to refer to as my baby lol please follow me on [twitter](#) and talk to me on [curiouscat](#)

Red Thread Cut, Red Thread Tied

Chapter Summary

Jimin cuts his last tie to Taehyung and yet...

Chapter Notes

tw: referenced miscarriage, prostitution



See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It was an easy lie, one that everyone fell for again and again. The first time that Jimin took care of Seokjin's mess, no one so much as noticed. He did it discreetly, without even a maid or a gardener taking note.

Seokjin seemed different in the weeks that followed, perhaps more closed off or stony, if that was

even possible. Jimin pretended like everything was normal, as if he didn't know about the weight that Seokjin's shoulders carried. Leah and Ru noticed the change in the imperial consort, and they whispered their fears to Jimin behind closed doors when Seokjin left to have tea with Lady Hae or take walks in the garden.

"It's not my place to say," Jimin told them quietly. "Seokjin will tell you when he's ready, if he ever is."

This seemed to ease their worries slightly, seeing that Jimin had none. However he simply hid his own feelings far too well, because inside he was a bundle of nerves, anxious and paranoid for Seokjin's sake.

He'd even gone so far as to write a letter asking for any sort of herbs or remedies that might increase fertility and had another servant he trusted smuggle it out to Madam Yerin's. To ask his foster mother for help was incredibly humbling, yet for Seokjin he would do it.

His answer came around a week later, but it was not in the form of another letter. Instead Yerin herself arrived.

Jimin was the one to answer the door whenever she knocked, standing outside of Seokjin's rooms.

"Yerin," he murmured. "What are you doing here?"

He noticed that she looked almost older, as if all of the fancy creams and treatments she once used had been washed away by time, finally revealing the deep lines and dark shadows of her face.

Yerin's mouth twitched. "You sent for me," she explained breezily. "Who was I to refuse?"

Jimin frowned. Perhaps that would have been true when Jimin was younger, no older than sixteen. Once he'd grown up it seemed like all Yerin could ever do was refuse him.

"Jimin," he heard Seokjin call from behind him. "Who is it?"

Jimin hesitated, fingers clenching around the door.

"Won't you let me in?" Yerin tilted her head to the side. "You wanted my help, yes?"

"Be kind to him," Jimin warned, before stepping aside to let Yerin through.

The madam brushed right by him and greeted the imperial consort with a curtsy. Seokjin raised his eyebrows and shut the book he'd been reading, fingers curling around the edges as it rested in his lap.

"Why, Madam Yerin!" Seokjin smiled, though Jimin could tell by the strain in his voice he was confused. "What a surprise to see you here! I'm afraid my brother is in the Jeon wing of the palace if you're hoping to supply him with one of your girls."

"I'm not here for Taehyung," Madam Yerin rose, pale blue skirts bunched in her hands. "There's something I thought I should give you. You left it at my house."

Seokjin furrowed his brow. "Oh?"

He gestured for Yerin to sit down in front of him. "Let's see what it is then."

Jimin had no idea where Yerin was going with any of this. He'd discreetly asked for a list of possible fertility treatments and yet she'd decided to march herself up to the palace and give them

to Seokjin directly? Jimin had half of a mind to wring her neck.

Yerin carried a satchel with her, and with one fluid motion, she withdrew something square and black from the bag. The madam set it on the table before them and slowly scooted it towards Seokjin. The prince's eyes widened.

"Jae's book," he realized, voice sounding oddly stiff. Seokjin blinked perhaps a little too rapidly. "How long have you had this?"

"Since you left it at my place. I waited for you to come back and collect it, but you never did. So I thought I might make myself useful and bring it here," Yerin explained.

"It's just a journal," Seokjin scoffed. "What good is it to me?"

"It is more than a journal, my prince," Yerin's eyes gleamed. "It is a confession."

Seokjin's face tightened. "Jimin," he turned towards the older boy. "Make sure no one's listening at the door, yes?"

Jimin bowed his head, a little worried by Seokjin's sudden paranoia, but he obeyed, opening the door only to stand outside of it, waiting for any outsiders that might happen by and discover whatever secrets Yerin meant to unveil. Jimin himself could still hear what was being said, though their voices were quite muffled.

For a few minutes, there was silence, most likely as Seokjin read whatever it was Yerin wanted him to see. Then -

A choked sob. "He didn't...he couldn't have!" Seokjin protested.

"But he did," Yerin responded softly. "I used to hate Jae for what he did, but now I can only pity him. He was such a weak, feeble-minded thing."

"Stop!" Seokjin hissed. "Don't insult his memory."

"What memory?" Yerin's voice turned hard. "He's the reason your mother wasted away. He rattled out her plans to Paek and practically handed the mad king her throne!"

"What do you know about my mother, Yerin?" Seokjin said, tone almost dangerous. "She knew of this, yet she kept him by her side until the very end! Surely she had a reason."

A snuffle.

Jimin had to lean closer, straining to hear what it was Yerin said next, voice filled with so much emotion.

"Who else would she have had, if not Jae?"

Another snuffle.

"She took pity on him, on the omega who betrayed her in vain. He thought Paek would take care of him, of him and his child, but he was cast aside so easily - of course he would regret betraying her, throwing away the only person who truly cared for him!"

Seokjin took a long, deep breath, and after a moment of silence, he finally spoke. "Enough of this. Why do you bring it up now, when it's no use? The only people who could have benefited from this information are all dead."

“There are names, my prince. The families who pledged support for your mother and then turned against her in favor of the king. Perhaps you’ll recognize a few.”

“Why are you helping me, Yerin?” Seokjin asked the very question that had been on Jimin’s mind.

“I myself have been wronged by these families. I have my own scores to settle. The enemy of my enemy is my friend, yes?”

“So you want me to do all the work for you?” Seokjin sounded amused. “Alright, I’ll take care of it.”

“That’s not - “ Yerin stopped, as if realizing whatever she wanted to say was no use. “Fine. As long as you don’t forget. They’re not just your enemies. They’re your mother’s as well. Do it in her memory, if nothing else.”

“Is this all you wanted to speak with me about?” Seokjin asked.

A pause and then Yerin whispered something that was indistinguishable, a series of mutters and mumbles.

“Yes,” Seokjin said, though he sounded a little confused. “Though I don’t know why it’s any of your concern.”

“Good,” Yerin sighed, pleased. It was the most content Jimin had ever heard her. “I’m glad. I hope for his happiness at least.”

Ah, Jimin thought, chest twisting. She must be asking after Taehyung.

Yerin’s affections for the bastard prince had always been out of place, had never made sense. Supposedly, she’d known his mother and even visited Taehyung once or twice when he was younger, but Jimin thought it was odd that she would care so much for a child that wasn’t even hers, that she herself hadn’t even raised.

Envy, a voice in Jimin’s head scolded him. You’re just jealous.

Jealous of what? That I never knew my own mother?

Jimin’s hands tightened into fists. He’d asked Yerin once or twice about his real parents, once the other older children had told him that Yerin wasn’t his mother.

“They are nobody. Nobody and nothing, since they threw away such a perfect baby like you,” Yerin had assured him, comforting yet cruel all in one breath.

Threw away. Jimin thought of the necklace that he kept in the box beneath his bed, fingers itching to claw at his throat, to dig in and fiddle with the memento that should have been there. He thought of the swollen mark on Jeongguk’s own neck, the infection that had yet to settle.

I will always be thrown away, won’t I?

The door opened, jolting Jimin out of his depressing headspace. He rubbed at his eyes, wiping away the tears before Yerin could see them.

“Jimin, you - ” she started upon meeting his gaze. The madam shook her head. “Nevermind.”

The beta withdrew something from her dress and her hand reached forward, clasping around Jimin’s own. “Here,” she murmured. “What you requested of me.”

Jimin flushed, a little surprised she had actually remembered her other purpose in coming here. “I will warn you, though,” Yerin’s thumb ran against the back of his hand in a soothing motion, her grip perhaps a little too tight. “There is only so much my herbs can do, at least if there are /supernatural/ factors at play.”

Jimin narrowed his eyes. “Like what? A curse? Do you think that’s what’s wrong?”

Yerin looked away, shame-faced. “I don’t know. I can’t sense those sorts of things. I only know that, if the problem persists even with remedies? Then there has to be something else behind it. Seokjin is young and healthy. A child should come easily.”

“Alright,” Jimin muttered. He glanced up and caught Yerin’s warm gaze. “Thank you, Yerin.”

For everything.

The madam ducked her head and slowly let go of his hand. She looked like she wanted to say more, but thought better of it.

“I’ll be on my way then,” she finally said, picking up her skirts to briskly walk away.

Jimin stared in the direction she had left, even long after she was gone.

Jimin set out to return the collar on a day in which he knew Jeongguk would be out with Lord Min, far away from any misunderstandings that the younger omega might stumble upon if he saw Jimin conversing with his alpha. Jimin decided to do so because he was meant to be getting out of their way, not causing more problems, and this seemed to be the best option.

Taehyung was confined to the Jeon wing if Jeongguk was not around, but if under such circumstances he desired or needed to leave, then a designated chaperone would serve as his guard.

Jimin realized that they did not want Taehyung running away. Something in his stomach twisted as he thought of Seokjin’s words, at how Taehyung was controlled by the Jeons now, forced into a mating he’d never even wanted.

Jimin found it hard to believe he’d never wanted Jeongguk, only because he could pick up on the affection Taehyung held for his mate, could see it in his eyes whenever he looked at him. The commitment and the controlling in-laws, yes, he’d never wanted, but it was a stretch to say that Taehyung did not care for Jeongguk at all.

The guard in front of Taehyung’s rooms seemed suspicious that Jimin was there, and he almost refused to let Jimin speak to Taehyung. “I’m only here to return something,” Jimin insisted. “I won’t even enter the room, alright?”

Finally, the Jeon guard relented and knocked on the door, telling Taehyung he had a visitor.

After a few moments, the door opened, and Jimin came face to face with the man he’d so desperately loved.

The first time that Jimin had met Taehyung was around three years ago. The flowers in Madam Yerin’s garden had begun to blossom, turning all sorts of pink and purple colors. A few of the others giggled that morning as they watered the flowers, sharing some sort of secret in whispers and murmurs.

Jimin sent them a sharp look. "What are you guys talking about?"

One of them laughed. "You mean you don't know?"

"I thought you knew everything," another sang. "You're Yerin's favorite after all!"

Jimin scowled, his cheeks puffing out at their teasing. "Not anymore," he remarked sullenly.

It had been months since Yerin turned distant suddenly, her eyes cold and her voice sharp whenever she had to address him. Jimin was left with an aching sense of loss, wondering just what he had done to garner his foster mother's disapproval.

"Last night, Changha entertained a prince!" one beta girl finally relented, sharing the news with Jimin.

Jimin balked. "A prince?"

He thought of the Crown Prince, a cold, serious beta who was said to never leave the palace. There was no way it could be Prince Seokjin. That left -

"Prince Taehyung!" one of the girls shrieked. "Oh, he's so handsome! Damn Changha! She always gets the best ones!"

"Do you think he'll come back?" another wondered hopefully. "Oh, maybe he'll come looking for someone else! I heard he moves from one lover to the next so very quickly!"

Jimin frowned as they began to dissolve into another fit of giggles, each of them expressing their hopes that should the prince did come back, he might spare them a glance.

"Are you done gossiping like a flock of hens?" Yerin's voice rang out as she made her presence known in the gardens. There was a scowl on Yerin's face, her eyes sharp. For a brief moment, they met Jimin's.

The younger omega looked away.

One girl piped up. "We're not gossiping! We're telling the truth. Changha spent the night with -"

Yerin's head turned so sharply that Jimin thought her neck might crack. "Did you not get the hint? Hold your tongue, Rion."

Rion flushed.

"They were only having a little fun," a beta named Lily insisted. She was one of the older girls. "You can't fault them for that, Madame Yerin. For a child's dreams. "

Yerin smiled, a hideous thing. "There are no children in my house, Lily."

The madam paused for a moment. Jimin felt his palms began to sweat, somehow worried that she might turn her cold gaze on him again. When she spoke, though, she did not speak Jimin's name.

"Changha no longer works here," Yerin explained, her voice like silk. "So we will not speak of her, not think or even remember her. She's made her choice."

It felt as if a cloud had appeared over their heads, though the sun still shined bright up above. Dread buried itself in Jimin's belly. He wondered what choice it was that Yerin spoke of, if it was really a choice after all, if it had anything to do with Prince Taehyung who she had last slept with.

“Why are you still standing around?” Yerin snapped. “Shoo, shoo! Get back to your duties.”

The majority of them scurried off in a hurry, obeying Yerin’s order. Jimin remained rooted in place, and he forced himself to meet Yerin’s gaze once more. Once everyone was out of earshot, he spoke up.

“Did you kick her out because she slept with the prince?” he asked, voice small.

Something in Yerin’s gaze softened, turning sad, yet her face remained stiff. “If that’s what you’d like to think, Jimin,” she remarked, “then go ahead.”

“What does it matter if she brought in money?” Jimin retorted, something angry rising from his stomach to his voice. He felt outraged on Changha’s behalf, Changha who had just been doing her job.

“She didn’t bring in money,” Yerin replied blithely.

Jimin’s fists unclenched, mouth opening in a silent ‘o’. He lost his spark because he understood Yerin’s words. Changha had slept with the prince - a customer - for free. Therefore, it was only fair to kick her out.

“But he’s a prince. What if he threatened her?” Jimin made his final case, yet Yerin had an answer for everything.

“The prince is not that type of person,” Yerin explained, as if she herself personally knew the royal she spoke of.

Jimin frowned, brow furrowing as he thought over her words.

“How are your dancing lessons coming along?” Yerin asked, changing the subject.

Jimin almost didn’t want to answer her. “They’re fine,” he lied. “Thank you.”

Yerin smiled, this one less hideous than the last. “You don’t have to lie, Jimin. I can read it on your face. You don’t like them.”

Jimin winced. “It’s not that I don’t like them. It’s just that...I don’t feel a passion for dancing anymore.”

Yerin’s smile faltered. “I see,” she murmured. The madam was the first to look away this time. “You don’t have to go to them anymore then.”

She turned to leave, but not before she instructed him. “Finish watering these flowers, please. Those forget-me-nots look a little on the dry side.”

Pointless. All of the flowers had already been watered, but Yerin knew that. Didn’t she?

The prince returned a week later apparently. Jimin knew of this only because the others were giggling about it for days afterwards. This time it had been Rion who had so luckily caught his eye, and she held a sort of meeting in which she relayed each and every detail to those who wished to hear, from how she caught Prince Taehyung’s eye to how he performed in the bedroom afterwards.

Jimin refused to attend such a thing, nose scrunching up in disgust. He didn’t care how handsome this prince was, or how nice he must have smelled. Of course he didn’t need to pick up tips from Rion, because Jimin didn’t ever plan on trying to catch the prince’s attention.

How ironic then, that he ended up unknowingly doing just that in a month's time.

There was someone in the gardens. A stranger. Jimin had went out to water the flowers and yet it was this strange man, a youthful alpha in fine green robes who blinked owlishly at Jimin.

"Who are you?" the alpha asked, cocking his head to one side.

Jimin huffed, a little perturbed. "I live here. I should be asking you that!"

The tips of the alpha's ears turned red, and he looked away. "Lord V," he said. "That's my name."

Jimin couldn't help it. He had to laugh. "'V'? Come on, that's so obviously an alias! What's your real name?"

The alpha didn't become upset that an omega was laughing at him, instead he seemed amused, because he smiled as well. It was a blinding thing, and something in Jimin's chest tightened.

He realized, as the sharp smell of this alpha wafted over, as the sun hit him at a certain angle that he was like gold, shining and bright. So very precious.

"Taehyung," the alpha said at last, and Jimin wasn't an idiot. He knew what that meant. "And you are?"

"Jimin. Park Jimin," his tongue felt too thick and dry in his mouth, and he forced himself to shut up. He felt embarrassed for being so rude. He was in the presence of a prince, after all.

"Sorry," he began to apologize profusely. "I didn't know that you were -"

Prince Taehyung held a finger up to his own lips, shaking his head. "Me? I'm no one, at least for one day."

Like all things beautiful and precious, all things rich and good, it was so very easy to admire him. To care for him.

Jimin fell in bed with Taehyung easily after that, and he found that the alpha liked to spout off poetry afterwards, waxing his love for Jimin as if they had known each other for years and not less than a day.

Jimin couldn't help but snort as Taehyung spoke about his eyes, which looked like shiny emeralds or green grass or something else ridiculous like that.

"I'm baring my heart to you and you find it ridiculous?" Taehyung gasped dramatically.

Jimin flushed, realizing that he had muttered the word out loud, and yet he had to defend himself from Taehyung's outrage, whether it was real or fake

"You will leave me," Jimin declared, shrugging off Taehyung's hands. "Once you find another new pretty thing to get your hands on, you won't even remember my name."

The omega stood to seat himself at his dressing table. He opened a jar of oil and began to rub it along the glands on his wrists, then his neck. It would diffuse any remainder of Taehyung's scent.

"I can't help it that I have a lot of love to give," Taehyung reasoned. "I'm a man of passion!"

Jimin smiled. His green eyes caught Taehyung's in the reflection of his mirror. "Oh? And just how

many omegas does this man of passion plan on gathering?"

Taehyung shifted, a little uncomfortable. "I don't plan on having a whole harem if that's what you're thinking. Those sorts of things don't work out! There would be too much fighting because I couldn't be fair to them all."

"Give me a number," Jimin insisted, his curiosity peaked at the prince's blunt answer.

Taehyung remained silent for a moment, and his cheeks flushed a little as he finally admitted, embarrassed. "Two at most. But maybe just one."

"One or two?" Jimin turned around, aghast. "No way! You're joking, aren't you?"

The alpha huffed and rolled his eyes as he turned away. He crossed his arms over his chest. "I'm serious!" he whined. "Why don't you believe me?"

"You're a man of passion," Jimin teased as he made his way back to the bed, crawling over to throw his arms over Taehyung's shoulders. "That's why. But come on, really? Only one or two? You go through lovers like you go through clothes."

"I want to have fun while I still can," Taehyung reasoned. "I like pretty things. Why should I not enjoy them? But I'm realistic. You can't have too many pretty things for too long. Eventually they get bored or start fighting or crying. No one is happy in the end. That's why I want one, my one and only."

"You say you're a man of passion," Jimin murmured, lips brushing up against Taehyung's ear. "I don't think that's the case."

Taehyung turned so that he was facing Jimin. "Oh?"

Jimin's hand came up, touching Taehyung's face. The air felt still and yet busy all at once, silent vibrations crackling as Jimin let out a deep breath. "You're a romantic," Jimin breathed. "That's all."

It was in the way Taehyung touched him, his large hands running over his skin so carefully and yet so firm, paying special attention to each of Jimin's moans and groans, not merely seeking his own release but his partner's enjoyment as well. It was not the first time that Jimin had had a customer seek to please him, and yet Taehyung's desire to please was something else. It was the way he would look up at Jimin, as if yearning for some sort of acknowledgement, some sort of praise.

So Jimin did just that. He told the alpha he was so good, the best he'd ever had, such a good boy for taking care of him - all of these praises choked out around the moans and groans that Taehyung's tongue and touch wrung out of him. Taehyung whined at the praise, his dark eyes wide and suspiciously wet.

It was as if Taehyung were under some sort of submissive spell in Jimin's arms, bare and pliant, and Jimin reveled in it. Too many alphas liked to put on fake airs, couldn't handle being pushed around, but Taehyung seemed to want to be put in his place, to be manhandled and told what to do in the bedroom.

Jimin loved every minute of it. For some reason it felt more real because of Taehyung's personality, because he was not afraid to ask for the things he wanted even if they might make him seem less of an alpha. Taehyung was genuine and good, and Jimin could at once understand why all the others had fallen over themselves in order to get his attention.

Yet he understood that what happened between them was not meant to last. Perhaps a week or two later, Taehyung would be in bed with another omega or beta, and that would be that.

He was disappointed in the sense that he would never have this again, that with every kiss he pressed against Taehyung's golden skin, he was one step closer to never kissing him again. Jimin hadn't set his expectations too high, however, and so the thought of Taehyung with someone else did not bother him. If they treated him well, paid him attention and made sure he was taken care of in all the ways he needed to be, then Jimin would be content.

Taehyung left in the morning, pressing a final kiss to the crown of Jimin's head as he whispered goodbye.

Jimin had murmured something, sleepy and too tired to form a full-fledged goodbye of his own, and the absence of warmth by his side had made him whine pitifully an hour later, curling up in his sheets in an attempt to keep out the cold.

He did not see Taehyung for about a month after that, assuming the alpha went on to find others that suited his fancy, and yet something remarkable happened.

Taehyung came back.

He kept coming back.

And the only one he would see was Jimin.

It wasn't like they slept together each time as well. Sometimes Taehyung simply wanted to see Jimin dance, other times he wanted to talk about art or myths or whatever sort of thing he was obsessed with that day.

Yerin, upon finding out about their arrangement or relationship - whatever it was - had not approved.

"He is a Kim!" she had hissed, furious as she confronted Jimin in his rooms late one night.

"So what? And I am a Park, a penniless whore? It doesn't matter. I know things can't last," Jimin had to blink away the tears that came to his eyes. "I know that. Why can't you just let me have this one thing for once, while it does last? Why do you hate me?"

Yerin stumbled back, as if struck. "Is that what you think?" she asked, voice strained.

Jimin puffed out his cheeks, refusing to answer.

"You are lucky I haven't kicked you out for what you've done. Changha and Rion and the others, all of them received not a shred of mercy from me, yet you spit my kindness back at my face? You who have done the same as them, who have disobeyed the rules of this house, yet for whom I turned the other cheek! You are ungrateful, Jimin! Ungrateful and foolish!"

"What do I have to be grateful for?" Jimin snarled back at her. "Why am I lucky? I didn't ask for you to take me in! I would have rather died on the streets than grown up in a place like this!"

He felt a sharp, stinging pain on his cheek as his head turned to the side from the force of the slap. Jimin's lips trembled, eyes burning as one hand came up to cradle his red cheek, looking at Yerin.

Yerin, who had hit him.

She seemed to realize this, staring at her hand as if it had moved on its own. Her hand shook, and yet her words were cold and absolute. "If you hate the life I have given you," she began, "then throw it away. See if I care."

It was the last time they had spoken for a long time. Only when Jimin proudly wore Taehyung's collar around his neck had she seen fit to chime in once more, her words more cruel and hateful as she reasoned with him and convinced the omega to throw everything away.

"Jimin," Taehyung croaked. He looked miserable and yet ecstatic in that one moment, a combination that Jimin would never understand.

"Hello, Taehyung," Jimin said softly. He felt his fingers tighten around the object in his hands, held behind his back so Taehyung would not see it right away and panic.

"You haven't let Jeongguk bite you," the omega found himself blurting out, catching sight of Taehyung's spotless neck.

Taehyung's face twisted into something ugly. "I can't," he said shortly, "they'll just have more control that way. He understands."

"You told me once you always wanted your omega to claim you back. No matter what," Jimin said, a little sad that something like that had been taken from Taehyung.

"It doesn't matter," Taehyung shook his head. He gestured for Jimin to come close, fingers clenching on the doorframe as his nostrils flared. "Come in, I'll make us some tea!"

"There's no need," Jimin ducked his head as the guard nearby cleared his throat.

"I have...have to return something to you," his eyes burned and suddenly he felt something thick in his throat, his chest a jumbled mess of emotions. Jimin had told himself he wouldn't cry, that he couldn't cry.

Taehyung paled. "No, no, you can't mean..."

Jimin held the collar out between them, his hand shaking, arm trembling, all of him on the precipice of collapse.

"I'm sorry, Tae," he murmured, sniffing. "But I think this is for the best. We need to start fresh, both of us. The only way we can have a new beginning...is if we forget the past."

Taehyung shook his head, eyes red from tears instead of rage. "I can't accept it. I won't accept it! I gave that to you because - the feelings I had, all of it still stands! How can I take it back?"

Jimin clenched his teeth, lowered his gaze so that he would not have to see Taehyung's grief. He thrust his hand forward, sucked in a deep breath. "You'll take it back! You have to take it back!" he declared, almost a snarl. "For Jeongguk!"

Taehyung stilled, eyes wide. A tense silence passed between them, and for a moment, Jimin thought he might still refuse. So he forced himself to smile and looked up at Taehyung. "You don't need to worry about me anymore. I'm being courted. I'm moving on. So too should you."

Only after this did Taehyung take the collar from his hand, fingers carefully folding around it, handling it like one might a child. "For you," he whispered. "For Jeongguk. I'll take it back."

Jimin should have felt relieved. So why then did his chest ache?

Free time. That was what Seokjin proposed.

"You should have time to yourself, Jimin," he insisted. "Even Leah and Ru do not fight me on this. They're glad to take breaks."

"Leah and Ru are just lazy," Jimin huffed, crossing his arms over his chest.

Seokjin's face softened and he sighed. "I don't want your entire life to revolve around taking care of me, Jimin. Please. Take care of yourself every now and then."

It was almost cruel in Jimin's eyes, because he liked to take care of people. Now he was suddenly told to take care of himself? He narrowed his eyes, letting out another huff. It was probably because Seokjin had noticed his change in mood as of late, how he would stare off into the distance, solemn and disheartened. Perhaps it was too reminiscent of the Jimin that Seokjin had first met, when the two of them were simple servants.

"Fine," he said sulkily. "I suppose I can find something to do in the free time you've given me."

Seokjin beamed.

Jimin tried reading, but quickly grew tired of that. Most of the stories were written in a formal, fancy script that just took too long to decipher. Perhaps he might have attempted painting or some other similar craft, and yet every time he saw a paintbrush, he felt a sharp pain in his chest.

There was only one thing he thought to do, one thing that still pleased him.

Dancing.

It had always been a passion of his, yet one that was stamped out by Yerin and subdued by Lady Jeon. Yerin who encouraged him to dance for customers and Lady Jeon who forced him to dance at the festival - Jimin found that when he was being told when or how to dance, he didn't like it very much. Especially when it was for other people, people he did not care for.

Jimin danced for himself. If he was going to dance for someone else, it would be for someone he cared for, not strangers as both Yerin and Lady Jeon had encouraged him.

So he found a small enclosure within the courtyard in which he could practice in private, away from prying, critical eyes. He was hidden by hedges and statues, and not many servants passed by the area, so Jimin went a week or two without encountering anyone. It was gratifying, to just let go and do something he loved.

After two weeks, Seokjin was already warmly commenting on the healthy flush to Jimin's cheeks, on the smile that now reached his eyes.

"I'm glad you decided to take my advice," Seokjin preened. "Looks like I was right for once,

huh?”

Jimin rolled his eyes.

“He won’t admit it, of course!” Leah chimed in, ever the suck-up as she held up a tray of fruit for Seokjin to try.

The omega’s eyes gleamed as he picked several ones to try. The consort had been ravenous as of late, appetite from his princely days returning full-force. He was constantly looking for something new and unique to try, and the kitchens obeyed his every request, no matter how outlandish it might seem.

Jimin sniffed, smelling something rather sweet in the air.

“And just what are you and Ru getting up to in your free time?” the prince turned to the other two and asked. “Jimin had least has the decency to share!”

Ru and Leah tittered nervously, refusing to say.

“It’s a surprise!” Leah, the worst liar ever, tried to lie.

“You’ll find out eventually,” Ru assured Seokjin, sounding much more convincing than her partner in crime. “We promise!”

Seokjin sighed but let it go. He gestured for them to clear the table of its plates, satisfied with his lunch. He patted his new food baby, thoroughly pleased. “They must have hired a new chef or something! Whoever it is, they really know what I like.”

As Ru and Leah left with the dishes, Jimin held out a bowl of water for Seokjin to wash his hands. He narrowed his eyes, taking note of the suspicious flush on the consort’s ears, the redness of his neck and the sweetness in the air. “I heard a certain beta you know has a lot to do with what gets served!”

Seokjin perked up, eyes twinkling. “Suran? Ah, that girl is always helping me out! I’ll have to treat her to something!”

He sank back in his chair, drying his hands on the towel offered. “Yes, I’ll...definitely have to thank her...”

“Seokjin,” Jimin started. He didn’t really know how to say this, how to approach it. “Are you...?”

Seokjin turned to look at him, eyes hooded and lips parted as the realization hit him as well. “How long?” he asked, voice cracking.

Jimin took his wrist in hand, raising it to his nose to sniff. “Another day perhaps,” Jimin ascertained. “Then you’ll be in the throes of heat.”

A shadow passed over Seokjin’s face, and the omega straightened his shoulders, standing from his chair with that familiar strength he always possessed. “Send word to the king,” he murmured. “Discreetly. I will not go to him. He must seek me out. Do you understand?”

Jimin nodded, mouth dry. He thought Seokjin’s strategy was rather risky. Though they were bonded, if Namjoon did not catch a whiff of his omega’s scent, did not see him in heat right before his eyes, then it would be easier to refuse him if he wanted to.

“Get Ru and Leah to prepare the scent blockers along the outside of my rooms,” Seokjin instructed. “I’d hate for anyone to run their mouths in case he does not come.”

“He will come,” Jimin assured him, though he himself was not sure of what he was saying. “You are his omega. He has to.”

Seokjin only smiled sadly.

Jimin informed the king the next morning as he broke his fast with the other three members of the Bangtan Four. The omega felt Jeongguk’s gaze nearly burn a hole in him as he whispered in the king’s ear, informing Namjoon that his omega was in heat.

For a moment, Namjoon didn’t move. Jimin almost thought he hadn’t heard, so he leaned closer again, intent on repeating what it was he had said. But then Namjoon stood suddenly, knocking his chair over in the process. Jimin backed away, startled.

“Excuse me,” he said curtly, before proceeding to storm off in the direction of Seokjin’s quarters.

Jimin couldn’t help but smile. Perhaps Seokjin thought too little of his alpha.

General Jung laughed awkwardly. “Um, what was that about?”

Lord Min patted his hand comfortingly. “Don’t worry. We just probably won’t be seeing much of him for the next few days.”

Jimin wondered just how this man knew so much about everything and everyone. Jung still looked confused, though, and Jeongguk had that wide-eyed deer look on his face still, staring at Jimin.

“The Imperial Consort is in heat,” Jimin explained, bowing. “I was sent to fetch the king in his place.”

With that, he took his leave.

For the next few days, Jimin was technically out of a job. Seokjin was preoccupied with his heat and Namjoon, so there was no need for Jimin, Leah, or Ru to stay around and take care of him when his alpha was there instead doing just that.

Perhaps it was horrible of Jimin, but the very same alpha he’d agreed to let court him had not crossed his mind in the past month. Jimin made an effort to at least speak to him during his week off, and yet nothing had changed since he last saw Hosung.

The alpha was overbearing and annoying. He’d been upset that Jimin had not tried to find time off to meet with him, but why would Jimin want to meet with him when all he did was whine or scold him?

“Sorry,” Jimin lied, not sorry at all. “I’ll try and do better.”

Already, though, it seemed as if this would not work out. His disinterest with Hosung could not be moved or crafted into something else.

After that, Jimin tried to avoid him more, to spend time alone. He danced whenever he could, body remembering all of the movements from long ago that had been taught to him.

It was on the third day of Seokjin’s heat that a voice called out to him in awe.

“Wow! You’re amazing!”

Jimin jolted and misstepped, losing his balance with a yelp. He saw the sky up above him as he fell back, closing his eyes as he prepared to hit the ground and yet -

Warm arms caught him before he could.

He stared up at the familiar wide eyes of Jeon Jeongguk, the gentle slope of his nose and flush of his cheeks. “Sorry,” the other omega apologized, looking guilty. “I didn’t mean to scare you!”

“You’re fine!” Jimin insisted nervously.

He realized that Jeongguk still had not let him go. Perhaps at the same time, the other omega took notice of this too, for not a second later he retracted his arms, as if burned.

An awkward silence ensued.

“You’re a good dancer,” Jeongguk finally said, breaking the silence. “Who taught you?”

“I’ve had many teachers and tutors that my madam hired for me,” Jimin admitted. “But I’m not that good.”

“You are,” Jeongguk protested, shuffling his feet and looking nervous for some reason. “You’re amazing, Jimin.”

Jimin flushed. He noticed that there was something about the look in Jeongguk’s eyes, something eager and wistful in his voice. “Would you like me to teach you some things?” he asked, hesitant.

He didn’t want to step on any toes and annoy the other omega, but it seemed like his fear was all for naught. Jeongguk’s lips curved up into a shy smile as he said, “Really? You would teach me?”

Jimin smiled back. “I’ll certainly try at least!”

Jeongguk was eager to learn, a model student as he watched every move Jimin made and tried his best to mimic it. He paid attention to the details and caught on rather quickly. Jimin’s heart swelled, if only because this was something he had not shared with someone else in a long time. To share his passion with another was something he couldn’t really put into words.

Jimin admired the fluid way that Jeongguk moved, the curves and lines of his muscles as he stretched and spun in time with Jimin’s own movement.

“You’re a fast learner,” Jimin panted, out-of-breath. “What’s your secret, Jeongguk?”

“Dancing is a lot like fighting!” Jeongguk laughed, breathless. “And I’m a really good fighter, yeah?”

Jimin sighed, pouting a little. “I guess. You definitely have the stamina for it.”

Jeongguk’s smile faded. “Not as much stamina as I used to have.”

Jimin wiped the sweat off of his forehead, looked at Jeongguk, at the fancy clothes he wore, the belt along his waist without his sword. He remembered the rumors he had heard, of Lord Jeon’s son, the warrior-omega, forced to give up his swords upon returning to the palace with his mate.

“If you want, you can come practice with me here,” Jimin offered. “Dancing is an art suited for omegas, yes? I don’t see how your father could refuse you from learning it.”

It was worth it, to see that smile.

Jimin performed another movement, and he felt Jeongguk's eyes on him still, obviously watching him rather closely. Yet when Jimin stopped and waited for Jeongguk to copy this one, the other omega just stood there.

"How did you do it?" Jeongguk asked, eyes wide and sad.

Jimin paused and stretched his arm out, tilting his arm this way and saying, "I just moved like this -"

"Not that. Taehyung," Jeongguk blinked furiously, shaking his head a little. "How did you make him fall in love with you?"

Jimin relaxed his body, arms falling back at his side as he turned to look at the other omega. "I didn't have to make him do anything, Jeongguk," he admitted softly. "I think that's your answer there."

Jeongguk sniffled and rubbed at his eyes. "I just...I thought I was helping. Then I thought we could make the best of things but he, he refuses to even try and I just--"

He stopped as Jimin took his hands in his own, making soft shushing sounds. "It's ok," Jimin murmured. "It's ok. You don't have to tell me."

"No! Jeongguk insisted, shaking his head. "I have to tell you. I stole him from you,*for a second time*, so you have to know that none of it was on purpose."

"Hush now, there's no need for this," Jimin scolded softly. His hands came up to cup Jeongguk's cheeks, wiping away the tears that made the trek down the sides of his face, and pulled Jeongguk into his embrace. The omega whined and cried out, tears wetting the cotton on Jimin's shoulders. Jimin took a deep breath, nostrils flaring, and shuddered. Jeongguk still smelled as lovely as he had over a year ago, when he'd looked up at Jimin with wide, eager eyes and wanted to be his friend.

There was something else to his scent now, the sharp smell of forage and rain that Jimin recognized must be Taehyung's. It complimented Jeongguk's own flowery scent, perhaps proving how the two were meant to be.

Jimin swallowed the lump in his throat, willed his heart to slow down.

"Would you be willing to forgive me, Jeongguk?" Jimin asked quietly.

Jeongguk sniffled. "What do you mean? What's there to forgive?"

"Would you let me your friend? For real, this time?"

Jeongguk's eyes lit up, as if there was an entire galaxy concealed in his gaze, and he grabbed a hold of Jimin's hands eagerly, leaning in so close their noses almost touched. "Really? You want...to be friends? Even after everything?"

Jimin smiled and nodded his head, and Jeongguk almost squealed, burying his face in Jimin's neck, nose tickling him a little. Jimin laughed and his arms, without his permission, tightened around Jeongguk's waist.

The week of Seokjin's heat ended, and soon enough things in the palace resumed as normal. The

king went back to his duties, the gossip around his absence dying down, and Seokjin resumed whatever scheme he'd conjured up for that month. Except something had changed between the two in that week they'd spent together.

Seokjin still wore the marks from his heat, hickeys strewn across his neck and collarbones. Jimin caught him pressing down on them several times, as if reminding himself they were still there.

"Did something happen between you and the king?" Jimin asked, frow burrowed.

Seokjin did not respond right away. Finally he admitted, while picking at one of the scabbed over bite marks on his neck, that he would no longer eat alone in his rooms. Instead he would dine with the king.

It was all he would say.

Jimin thought of it as a good omen, a sign that perhaps their relationship was on the mend.

Two months later Seokjin bled heavily again. Jimin buried the rags out in the garden, right beside the purple daffodils he'd planted months ago. This time he planted anemones atop the rags and offered up a prayer, just as he'd seen Yerin do so many times before.

"The soul of the child will attach itself to the flower, will grow and thrive just as it should have in this life," she said wistfully.

Jimin had not asked about her own child's flower, which he knew had long since wilted and died.

The next day, Jimin wrote another letter to Yerin and asked for her to give him the name of the best shaman, witch, or priestess she knew, because the herbs had not worked.

Jessi, she replied. Seokjin will know where to find her.

Jimin clenched the paper in his fist, a sense of determination, of urgency overcoming him. His friend would have a child, a live child in his arms one day. This, Jimin swore. He'd make it happen. No matter what.

Chapter End Notes

AHHHHH I AM SOOOOOOOO SORRY THIS IS SO LATE!!! :(i have no excuses other than school hit me hard and i had to start working again in order to pay for this BTS concert in may RIP....

also i've recently become obsessed with mo dao zu shi???? like oMG im in loVE! dkafs

but yeah, i really hope that i haven't disappointed too many people and thank you so much to everybody who has waited so patiently for this fic T-T i love each and every single one of you readers!! ur the best!! <3

...ALSO i'm going to have a poll on my twitter in which you guys vote for namjin no.1 baby name :)) so look out for that in the future.

as always pls leave comments/kudos/subscribe if you enjoyed!! also check out my

twitter!!

(tbh idk why i've been linking my tumblr when i never get on it anymore....hmmmm)

Dreams

Chapter Summary

Yoongi comes to some realizations and encounters his own chilling omens.

Chapter Notes



TW: eye trauma, eye horror, unintended self-harm

(also it's CST where i am so i stuck to my promise to update on wednesday lol)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

There was a stranger staring at him. Yoongi's left eye twitched, and after he walked a few more feet down the hallway, he found himself stopping. He turned around and asked with a smile, "Is there something you need, Miss...?"

The blonde woman jolted a little, perhaps shocked that Yoongi had actually acknowledged her. In but a moment she collected herself, smoothing her elegant green skirts down with a laugh. “It’s Yerin,” she introduced. “Madam Yerin. Perhaps you’ve heard of my establishment downtown? It’s rather infamous.”

Yoongi had heard of it, and he realized that he had heard of her too, this Madam Yerin, the beta who ran one of the late Adviser Paek’s most illustrious brothels. He wondered what she was doing here in the palace, what sort of business had drawn her here.

“Don’t worry, I’m on my way out,” the beta assured him, tilting her head to the side as she continued to smile pleasantly. “You are...Eunha’s son, yes?”

It was the first time somehow had referred to Yoongi as ‘Eunha’s son’. It was always Lord Min’s son, Lord Min’s heir, because most did not even know his mother still lived, let alone who she was.

“You know my mother?” Yoongi asked, startled.

Yerin smiled. “We grew up together, Eunha and I. She even introduced you and I once. Don’t you remember?”

Yoongi blinked, a little confused. He had no idea what she was talking about. He’d never met this woman before in his life. The beta took a step closer as she continued to speak.

“You were about...hmm, maybe this high?” Yerin said, lowering her hand down to about her waist.

Something seemed to get in the corner of Yoongi’s eye. Perhaps it was an eyelash. He closed his eye, rubbing at it, but the pain seemed to worsen. “You were going to the palace with your mother. She almost introduced me to your father. Don’t you remember?”

“What?” Yoongi murmured. He took a step back, vision blurry, and yet Yerin followed, taking one step forward.

“There’s a block on your memory,” the gisaeng said in a hushed, silky tone. Yoongi flinched as he felt something soft and heavy rest over his eyes, a darkness sweeping over his vision. “Your eyes are *closed*. Open them, Yoongi. You have to see.”

Madam Yerin removed her hand, and Yoongi opened his eyes, a searing headache splitting his mind, but Yerin was gone, having disappeared without a trace.

As if she had been nothing more than a mirage.

There were lines on Hoseok’s forehead, a scrunched-up frown cut into his face as he joined Yoongi for dinner that evening in his quarters. The omega sensed his anger, his worry, the negative emotions buzzing around him and through the bond they now shared.

Their wedding had been a quiet affair, with no need for pomp and circumstance. All of that had been required of a king and a former prince perhaps, but it was not required of a lord’s second heir and a witch’s son. They’d said their vows before the minimum witnesses required and consummated their bond that very night. A deep imprint of teeth decorated Yoongi’s neck, and a similar mark had been given to his mate.

Yoongi rested his hands on his mate’s shoulders as he leaned into his side, purring in contentment as his fingers itched to touch Hoseok’s neck, to feel the subtle scar his own teeth had left behind.

“What’s the matter?” Yoongi murmured, hoping that his touch and voice might placate his mate.

Hoseok’s face softened slightly, but not all of the lines disappeared. “My father’s sick,” he sighed. “It’s probably nothing, but he refuses to see a physician.”

“That old man is still as stubborn as ever,” Yoongi rolled his eyes. “What’s bothering him? Is it his shoulder again?”

Hoseok leaned his head down on Yoongi’s shoulder, letting out yet another sigh. “It’s his stomach this time. My sister told him he probably just ate too much.”

Yoongi laughed. “That is possible!”

The omega threaded both of their fingers together. “Is that all that’s bothering you, though?”

“Besides my father? Well, Lord Jeon’s proposal. That man thinks he can order us all around like we’re his children.”

Something in Yoongi’s stomach twisted. He thought of Lord Jeon’s order for Hoseok to resolve the border skirmishes they’d gotten word on. It upset him for a multitude of reasons. First, that Jeon thought he had any sort of power to tell Hoseok, one of the Bangtan Four, what to do. Second, the possibility of Hoseok leaving him again, of not seeing his beloved for weeks or months or even years. “Lord Jeon is something else entirely,” Yoongi scowled. “I’ll be damned if he tries to separate us so soon.”

So soon after their bonding, he meant. Though they’d been mated for months and the bitemarks were both healthy and sealed, it was too early. Yoongi had went off of his suppressants. He’d be due for a heat in a few weeks, would need his new mate by his side.

Hoseok shook his head, smiling as he cradled Yoongi’s face in his hands, squishing his cheeks, which had already puffed out in outrage. “Don’t worry! I’m sure Namjoon and Lord Woo will have a way of dealing with Jeon soon. You know they always do.”

“They placate him,” Yoongi huffed. “And they placate him and placate him. For him to shut up about one thing, we have to give him his way on two others. One of these days he’ll ask for too much, but we’ll have no choice except to give him it all.”

The smile slowly fell from Hoseok’s face. “Have you heard anymore from Jeongguk on the situation?”

The situation. So that’s what they were calling it now.

Yoongi frowned and said very quietly. “He told me we have nothing to worry about. Even if he does enter his heat next month, nothing will come of it. He promised me.”

“How can he be so sure? Has he prepared anything?” Hoseok asked, tilting his head to the side.

“I suppose you can say that,” Yoongi murmured.

He thought of the tea that Jeongguk had asked for, the musky, seemingly harmless herbs that would rip the problem to shreds if need be. Jeongguk was insistent on protecting Namjoon, at least until he and Seokjin had a child, an heir of their own. Any child of theirs would have more claim over that of Jeongguk and Taehyung, the bastard prince. Though the few imperialists that were left would be supportive of any direct descendant of Hyunseok’s on the throne, they were rather old-fashioned. As a result, their preference remained Seokjin.

But if Seokjin could not conceive...

Yoongi had heard the whispers these last months, passed along from lords to servants, all of them speculating over Seokjin's true status. Some still believed he really was a beta, that he'd disguised himself as an omega in order to marry the new king and hold some sort of control on the throne. Others said that he was barren, that since he could not even go into heat on his wedding night, the consort had no chance of conceiving.

Yoongi had listened patiently, sending glares and small hexes at anyone he caught speaking ill of the imperial consort. Yet he himself could not help but dwell on it, on whether the whispers were right or not. Seokjin had went through a heat about a month ago, but no announcement could be made until he was at least a month along.

Yoongi wondered if that sort of announcement would ever come.

He felt a sort of sadness settle in his heart as he watched Seokjin from afar. The other omega was always out of his reach these days, content to busy himself with his vapid servants and hide himself away in his rooms.

Yoongi knew first-hand how cruel the court could be. Once he'd been brought back to the palace when he was newly presented, essentially thrown to the wolves, he had had little friends. He was strange, with skin too pale and hair too white. Though he was the Min heir, he was avoided at all costs. The tale of his uncle's attack had seemed to reach the palace before he even arrived, and no one wanted to take the chance to befriend him.

He was alone, with only the memories of his friends. With Hoseok's golden band heavy on his finger, the memory of Namjoon's smile and Jeongguk's bright eyes.

But he had Seokjin.

Seokjin, who had saved him and damned him, who had brought him here to the palace, where the mad king took a strange sort of interest in him.

"You remind me of someone I knew," the king had said when he first met him, eyes wild as they raked over Yoongi's small, trembling form. "Someone I knew once, long ago."

The gaze was not lustful, as Yoongi at first feared it to be, but merely intrigued.

"Tell me, Min Yoongi. Do you know any magic?"

Magic was power. It was a way for the king to hold onto the many memories that left him every day. Yoongi had understood, after years living in the palace, that there was a sort of beast within the king. It had latched onto his left forearm, sinking its fangs and claws inside.

An imposter, poisoning him from the inside out.

Seokjin was different from his father. Instead of a vassal filled with smoke, there seemed to be two distinct energies within his body, in sync and yet on the precipice of ruin. The core of one seemed to be in his back, the other in his womb.

The spirit sealed in Namjoon was dispersed, focused nowhere, flowing everywhere. A total darkness covered in a gray light. To be expected from a man brought back to the dead.

Of course, Taehyung had no distinct energy, having been born illegitimate and with no phoenix mark on his skin. Except -

Yoongi shook his head. There was no way, right? Taehyung was the son of a Kim, yes, but he was a bastard, his blood sullied with commoner's blood. There should be nothing too special about him. Whatever gifts he might have been blessed with had been diluted by his own lineage.

But he couldn't be too sure. It had been a while since Yoongi had last spoken to Seokjin's younger brother. The alpha was always in a hurry it seemed, even when he was a child, bouncing from one place to the next. Taehyung used to be scared of him, as well, which made any conversation hard.

They had never had a reason to interact, so they never became familiar. It remained like that to this day. Perhaps it would be a good idea to meet with the alpha, though, to prove Yoongi's assumptions either right or wrong.

He felt like there was something he was missing when it came to the Kims, if only because of how mysterious the little magic they carried was. All of it was condensed in the form of a phoenix mark, and yet no one knew what the mark did, what sort of powers or abilities it might hold. Some had said it was merely a vanity thing, while others said it had to do with keeping demons sealed.

Whether it was truly a demon that was sealed inside of those Kims by a phoenix mark, Yoongi wasn't sure, but he did know that the mark itself had the properties of some sort of seal.

Yoongi had tried to find books on the subject, or even old, outdated scrolls which might give him hints as to where to look next, but his search had come up with nothing. The omega continued to run his fingers through his alpha's hair soothingly, lost in thought.

"Things will work out," Hoseok murmured, assuring both himself and Yoongi with his words. "They always do, don't they?"

Yoongi could only hum in agreement and hope that his mate was right.

He wrote to his mother, hoping that perhaps she might have some hidden insight on the Kim line, yet she responded back with no answers. Instead his mother spoke of the Qing empire and how they had begun to expand their reach, of the skirmishes near the border which drew closer and closer to her own home and that of Yoongi's estate in the north. Nowhere in her letter did she write of the Kim line and the curse they seemed to carry on their skin.

Yoongi was less than pleased. Something in him whispered of things he'd ignored for a long time, of ideas he'd not allowed himself to fully think and give life to, and yet he ignored those traitorous thoughts once more.

He consulted the next best source he could think of, though perhaps the one that would be somehow less willing to talk to him than his mother.

Seokjin.

Yoongi did not wait for the imperial consort to decline his invitation. Instead the omega showed up in his residence while he was having his weekly tea with Lady Hae and his servants. If Seokjin was surprised to see Yoongi show up at his residence unannounced, he did not show it.

"Well," the consort began pleasantly, lips curled into a smile. "What brings Lord Min here all of a sudden? Or is it Lord Jung?"

Yoongi's eye twitched. "I have kept my name," the omega insisted. "There's no need to refer to me as Lord Jung. It'd be improper anyways, as that title belongs to my dear father-in-law. May I sit with you?"

Seokjin inclined his head, and though one of the girl servants glared at Yoongi, she still pulled out a chair for him to sit.

Lady Hae brought her fan to her face, fanning it slightly as she hid her smile from view. “How...untraditional,” she commented. “I wonder, what did your dear father-in-law have to say about that? I heard he’s been rather cold to you, Lord Min!”

Yoongi smiled. Lady Hae had obviously been listening to the gossip that traveled through the palace as of late. Lord Jung had indeed been upset when Yoongi and Hoseok married and mated, when Yoongi, as the last legitimate Min, refused to give up his name. Worse was when Lord Jung learned Hoseok would not inherit the Min estate in Yoongi’s place. The old man had been livid at that, ranting and raving that Hoseok was still too weak, that he’d fallen for the wiles of witchspawn.

“What do you know of my mother?” Yoongi retorted sharply. “What right do you have to call her a witch? You’ve never even met her.”

There had been rumors that the former Lord Min had mated a witch, but most knew her to be dead. For years, Eunha had been in seclusion, never one to show her face to her own son and yet even now she kept a low profile. There was no way Lord Jung would have met her, even though he’d been good friends with Yoongi’s father. He had no basis for his accusations.

Lord Jung paled at Yoongi’s words, something guilty twisting in his expression, and he remained silent on the matter after that.

“My father-in-law is a very cold man, Lady Hae,” Yoongi finally responded. “He acts that way to everyone, not just me.”

Lady Hae inclined her head, though her eyes narrowed.

“What have you come here for, Lord Min?” Seokjin asked, getting straight to the point.

Yoongi turned to him, noting the bags under his eyes, the unhappy curve of his lips. “I wanted to ask you about your mark,” Yoongi lifted his chin, “and how much your mother told you about it.”

Seokjin stilled, and for a moment, he did not blink or breathe, or even move. When he spoke, he chose his words very carefully. “You should know more than anyone what the mark of the Kims signifies, Yoongi. My father could never stop talking about it.”

The consort leaned back in his chair, closing his eyes for a moment. “It conveys legitimacy and power. The mark of the phoenix. Those that wear it will do great things. They are noble and brave. It is the marking of a king.”

“What your father claimed yes,” Yoongi waved his hand, perhaps sounding a little impatient, if only because he had heard it all from the late king many times before. “I asked about your mother.”

Seokjin opened his eyes, and there was something dark there. “My mother died when I was four,” Seokjin scoffed. “You think I cared to remember what she said of some phoenix mark back then? Besides, what business is it of yours?”

“I wanted to know if perhaps King Hyunseok’s mark made him go mad,” Yoongi said quietly. “And if perhaps the same thing could happen to Namjoon.”

Seokjin blinked, gaze softening, if only a little. Then he did something rather odd.

He laughed.

His servants looked at him fearfully, inching closer as if they might need to scent him to calm him, and Lady Hae's eyes widened, her fan slowing.

"Ah, such worry for your king!" Seokjin exclaimed, voice full of mirth. "How patriotic, how loyal for a snake like you."

Yoongi flinched. "Namjoon is different than your father. He is kind. I only fear that his kindness will- "

"Will what? Taper off into madness?" Seokjin scoffed.

Yoongi remained silent.

Seokjin stared at him, eyes narrowing. "As long as Lord Woo did not craft himself another impostor, Namjoon should be fine."

Yoongi frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Only that you should be asking Lord Woo about this thing, not me," Seokjin smiled, cocking his head to the side.

"Seokjin," Lady Hae interjected, a warning.

"I doubt Lord Woo knows anything about your phoenix marks," Yoongi insisted.

"Perhaps," Seokjin nodded. "But he certainly knows how to fake them, doesn't he?"

Fake them.

Another impostor.

The mad king who clawed at his faded mark and drew blood and screamed and cried that he was a Kim, he promised he was Kim Hyunseok, the only male alpha heir to the throne.

For some reason, Yoongi felt his hands tremble. "The phoenix mark shows legitimacy. Only those that wear it can sit the throne. Nobody would have supported him if there was no mark, no proof," he muttered, mostly to himself as he made sense of things.

Seokjin brought his cup of tea to his lips and took a sip. Once he'd set it down, he said, "Maybe you should talk to Lord Woo, or even Lord Jung, and ask just how my father came to power in the first place."

Lady Hae fanned herself furiously now, as if hoping to disperse some of the tension in the room.

Yoongi was reeling. Because suddenly some things were clicking, were merging together to form a clear picture, an explanation for at least some of his questions.

He realized suddenly why it was the king's aura had felt so wrong, why the throne had sucked his energy day by day. The words came back to him, of the king's screeching.

"There's no god in me, no god in me, no god, no god!" he'd yelled mournfully, tearing at his hair.

Yoongi reached out to feel the aura of the man in front of him, and the scorching heat that met him had Yoongi reeling back. It was just as he'd thought. This energy inside of Seokjin was cleaner,

was purer than anything he'd ever felt from King Hyunseok.

Not a demon, Yoongi thought. A god.

"Forgive me," the Min lord sucked in a deep breath of air, blinking furiously. "I have to - I must leave. Immediately."

He had to speak with Lord Woo, had to confirm if what Seokjin said was true. He barreled down the halls, nearly running over servants and nudging court ladies and lords out of his way as he approached Lord Woo's quarters.

Yet it wasn't Lord Woo he ran into first. It was Lord Jung.

The older alpha caught Yoongi by the shoulders before he could knock him over, wheezing. Yoongi blinked and stopped to take notice of the man in front of him. Lord Jung looked awful. His skin was as pale as snow, as Yoongi's hair, and the man's eyes were bloodshot and bulging.

"Watch where you're going, Lord *Min*," the old man still found the energy to sneer. Lord Jung made to leave, withdrawing from Yoongi as one of his hands clutched at his stomach, wincing. Yoongi would not allow him to leave. He tugged at the sleeve of his shirt.

"What do you know of the mad king's phoenix mark?" the omega questioned suddenly.

Hoseok's father had not expected this question, so for a moment he was quiet, eyes narrowed as his mind processed Yoongi's words. Finally, he shook his head. "What are you talking about? What does that even matter? The mad king is dead!"

"Did Lord Woo fake it for him?" Yoongi asked instead. "So that Hyunseok could have the throne, instead of Sumi?"

Yoongi did not think it possible, but Lord Jung paled even further. He began to sputter, to blubber out some sort of protests. It was the only confirmation the omega needed.

Yoongi let go of his father-in-law's sleeve, repulsed. "You helped him rise to power," he murmured, "but then you had to dethrone him. You had to clean up your mess."

"What does any of that matter now? It's all in the past. It doesn't mean anything," Lord Jung insisted. He began to clear his throat, but it escalated into a loud, rumbling cough.

The throne was not supposed to be Hyunseok's. He had no mark. Because of this, it made him go mad. There was a certain magic tied into the Kim bloodline, into the position of king, and Hyunseok's position had violated it. He was unworthy, and so he suffered the consequences.

Namjoon suffered. He lost his family. He *died*.

Yoongi suffered. He lost his father. His mother turned into a stranger.

And all of it...could have been avoided.

"It means everything," Yoongi hissed, blinking away the hot tears that gathered in the corners of his eye.

He was unbearably angry, so filled with fury that his fists shook, that his nails dug into the palms of his own hands and drew blood. He wanted to scream, to cry out or even break something because it seemed like all anyone ever did was lie to him, withholding the truth.

“But no...it’s not right that you had to clean up your mess....you had us do that for you...Namjoon and I, Hoseok and his sister, Jeongguk and his brother. We were the ones out there fighting. Coming up with plots and getting our hands dirty while you wrote a letter or two and sat back and watched. We were the ones who got rid of your mistake and yet - “

Lord Jung continued to cough, but Yoongi ignored it. The omega had to stop talking. He couldn’t continue anymore. He thought of his mother, his twisted mother whose hair was no longer white, whose eyes shined with a cold, dark malice that Yoongi had never seen before. He closed his eyes and thought -

Don’t you remember?

“Yoongi!” she had screamed, tears running down on her face as silver cuffs decorated her wrists. “Lord Min, please! You can’t! He’s our SON!”

He remembered looking up, startled, confused, frightened, and the face that looked down at him was familiar now. It was Lord Jung that took him away, as Lord Min, his father, helped hold his mother back.

Yoongi’s head hurt, eyes burning all the way into the back of his skull.

The past bled into the present, an inky red, a stain that could never come out.

The sins of the father were passed on through the son, and the cycle continued, with more and more blood spilled each time until finally there would be no one left to killed.

I see, Yoongi thought, shaken. I understand.

But did he really?

The wretched sound of coughing worsened, and Yoongi looked down. Lord Jung had fallen to his knees. He continued to cough, showed no signs of stopping anytime soon. His eyes turned panicked, one hand reaching out for Yoongi while the other covered his mouth.

Red specks turned into mouthfuls and soon Lord Jung was falling forward, bloody hand grabbing at the bottom of Yoongi’s hanbok. It was a good thing the material was black.

“Call...physician!” Lord Jung insisted.

Yoongi’s nostrils flared, and a sweet scent entered the air. He remembered this smell, knew it from the memory of his mother handling the plant’s sweet berries with care, her hands covered with gloves. He knew then that there was no need to call a physician. It wouldn’t matter in the end, because Hoseok’s father had been poisoned.

Lord Jung looked up at him with watery eyes narrowed in hatred, with a snarl on his face as he tried to curse out his son-in-law one last time, yet it was no use. His throat had already swollen shut. All he could do was spit out more blood, the sticky red clinging to Yoongi’s clothes.

Yoongi took a deep, shaky breath and closed his eyes. He did not open them until he was sure Lord Jung had died.

Hoseok had respected his father, had loved him perhaps even less than he respected him, so when he learned of his death, he did not cry. He merely shrugged his shoulders, nodding his head a little. “He’d been sick for a week or two,” he murmured. “I had worried, of course, but -”

Yoongi pulled his alpha into a hug, dug his nose into his neck to hopefully rid himself of that awful sweet scent, and he whispered to Hoseok that his father had been poisoned.

At this revelation, Hoseok stiffened, a little surprised, yet still he did not rage and wail. "What do you mean? Who would have gained anything from that?"

Yoongi shook his head. "I don't know," he whispered, because he didn't, at least not at the moment.

Then the rumors began to circulate after the funeral, pointing at him as the culprit, saying he was a witch, he'd poisoned the father-in-law who disapproved of him, and any member of King Namjoon's court could be next.

Yoongi understood then, that the person who had murdered Lord Jung wanted to see rifts grow in the Bangtan court, to see perhaps Hoseok and Yoongi turn on each other, or at least for some of the others to at least suspect that Yoongi might have had a hand in it.

Yoongi told Hoseok what he had learned from Seokjin the day his father died and his suspicions that Seokjin was behind it all.

"He hates me," Yoongi murmured. "What better way to get his revenge than to murder your father, one of the lords responsible for ruining his life, and blame it on me, your mate?"

"Seokjin has very few allies," Hoseok shook his head. "Only Lady Hae and those servants of his, who aren't allowed anywhere near the kitchens. Even if he did poison my father, how could he have done it?"

"I don't know, but he did," Yoongi declared. He frowned. "Should we tell Namjoon?"

Hoseok nodded, and so they did just that. Namjoon looked uncomfortable as they relayed to him their suspicions.

"Could Seokjin have done it? Could he have killed my father?" Hoseok asked, though there was no deep emotion to his voice, only mere curiosity.

"If Seokjin believes himself to be wronged," Namjoon said simply, "he can do anything he sets his mind to."

"So you're saying my father's murder was just," Hoseok stated.

Namjoon was silent, pensive. "There's a lot your father didn't tell us, that Lord Woo and Lord Jeon and all of the others saw fit to keep from us. I'm not saying your father's murder was just. Murder is never just."

"Why would they ever admit their part in supporting the mad king's rise?" Yoongi sneered. "They didn't want us to think them fickle, to blame them for what they'd done. If we suspected them in any way, they wouldn't have gained as much as they did after the war."

Hoseok frowned. "Maybe they didn't want us to know so we could all stay united, so that we could keep fighting as one, as the Bangtan Four."

"Still, they were wrong to not tell us the whole truth. Shouldn't we have known all of the facts of the situation, considering we were risking our lives for this cause?" Namjoon reasoned, eyes flaring.

“Then are you saying we’re in the wrong, too?” Hoseok asked. “Should we have just let the mad king carry on, killing whoever he wanted and starving the citizens?”

Namjoon looked away, and Yoongi shook his head, letting out a low hiss as he answered his mate. “I don’t...listen...I don’t know, alright? All I really do know is that it didn’t feel *right* killing all of the servants and nobles in the palace.”

A tense silence hung in the air. Yoongi’s neck throbbed as he felt Hoseok’s displeasure through their bond, and he could almost taste his mate’s guilt on his tongue so easily he might have mistook it for his own.

Their king broke the silence, steepling his hands together before him as he took a deep breath.

“There’s no right. No wrong,” Namjoon said finally. He looked weary, almost ancient, and he sounded very tired. “The past is the past. Tell Jeongguk what we know now, Hoseok. After that, we’ll never tell anyone else of it again.”

“So we forget about those sins,” Yoongi stated. “We let time wash them away, like they were nothing.”

“We can’t change it, but we can’t forget about it either. We merely carry the weight of those burdens and *atone*,” Namjoon’s smile looked so painful and sharp that Yoongi feared it might cut into the sides of his face.

Yoongi straightened his shoulders, lifting his chin as he felt Hoseok grab his hand to give it a squeeze. “He will go after Lord Woo next, I think.”

Namjoon scratched at the warped scars on his neck, fingers straying close to the phoenix mark they surrounded. “I see,” he nodded.

“Are you going to stop him?” Hoseok’s jaw tightened. “Or is my father the first in the line of many to fall prey to your dear consort?”

“I’ll speak to Seokjin,” Namjoon promised. “But I can only do so much.”

“Well, you certainly can’t just let your husband go around killing whoever displeases him! We didn’t kill the mad king just to get ourselves a mad consort!” Yoongi sneered, though something in his chest tightened at his words, ashamed to refer to Seokjin in such a way.

“If Seokjin is mad, then it is because I have made him that way,” Namjoon retorted rather shortly.

Hoseok and Yoongi glanced at each other, then both turned to Namjoon worryingly.

The king rolled his eyes, crossing his arms over his chest. “Enough. Hoseok, I know your father’s death doesn’t upset you that much, especially after hearing of his hypocrisy from Yoongi. Your sister doesn’t seem that displeased either. And there’s no need to look at me like that. I’ll warn Seokjin to not kill anyone else who slights him, alright?”

Yoongi’s gaze softened and he lowered his voice. “I’m just worried. If he thinks he can kill any court official as he likes, then what’s to stop him from killing you?”

Something passed over Namjoon’s eyes, an expression so deep, so painful and warm that it startled Yoongi. “Seokjin and I have come to an agreement,” he murmured. “Or perhaps I should say, an understanding.”

Again, Yoongi thought of the creature that had wrapped itself around Namjoon's neck, of the powerful beings that nestled themselves deep in Seokjin's muscle and bone.

Namjoon and Seokjin were descended from the same Kim ancestor but born to different family branches. They carried the same sort of beasts inside of them, kept at bay by the same sort of curse or seal or whatever it was that made them docile.

If there is anything that Namjoon or even Seokjin should fear, Yoongi realized, eyes never leaving the gleaming gold and crimson mark on his friend's neck. Perhaps they should fear themselves.

t night, Yoongi dreamed.

He saw visions of people both strange and familiar, of scenes he'd seen before and places he'd never even visited. It was an odd mixture of real and fantasy that plagued his dreams, and he found that it was almost a challenge to pick apart the facts from the fiction, so tightly interwoven were they both.

"Don't you remember?" he heard the voice of the gisaeng say. He felt her hands cover his eyes from behind, closing them and running along the tops of his lids. "You've been blinded," the woman whispered. "There's a block. In your memory, in your heart. You've had it right from the start."

The gisaeng warped into something else, into his father who was looking down at him, his face the perfect picture of horror. "I'm sorry, Yoongi," his father murmured. "I'm sorry. I've dishonored you and your mother and yet...there's nothing I can do to fix it!"

He felt someone grab his shoulders and he glanced back, just as the person's nails warped, turning into talons that dug deep into Yoongi's skin. He yelped and tried to pull free, but the puppet behind him would not let him. Its paper mouth flapped open rapidly to speak.

"Come now, witch! Lord Min has handed you over! Can't you see there's no use in struggling?"

It spoke in King Hyunseok's voice, and just as Yoongi felt the puppet's hands start to wander did he scream, calling out for someone, anyone to save him from the thing in his dreams.

Yet it was not a general plea for help that he screamed. No, it was a name.

"Seokjin!" he cried, and suddenly the paper puppet burst into flames.

Yoongi was thirteen again, lost and alone in those woods while he waited for his uncle to come and claim him, but the older omega in front of him offered his hand and spoke in a low crooning voice as he promised he was safe.

"It's alright," Seokjin smiled. He grabbed Yoongi's gnarled hand in his own, and suddenly, the younger remembered why his hand was gnarled in the first place.

Crack, snap. Crack.

There was no glass or even knife in Seokjin's possession this time, so the prince made do with what he had. His own hands. He crushed each and every one of Yoongi's fingers in his grasp, turning them to dust.

"Do you see now, how you have ruined me?" Seokjin, the fourteen-year-old Seokjin, repeated. His face was expressionless, his eyes dark enough to rival the mad king's.

“I saved you!” the other omega continued, voice a low rumble. “And look what you’ve done to me!”

Seokjin’s face began to crack and peel, falling away like glass. There was a lopsided circlet on his head, stained with rust. Or perhaps it was blood. “Doomed to the same fate I once saved you from. Mated to the man who stole my inheritance.”

“How could you, Yoongi?” the Seokjin in his dreams wept. “You were my friend.”

“How could you?” a chorus of voices echoed. Yoongi knew Lord Mun, Lady Nam, Lord Hae and all the others were among them, along with all the servants who had died within the palace walls due to his schemes.

Shut up, Yoongi thought. He wanted to close his eyes, but they were already closed. He was dreaming, and he couldn’t wake up.

Don’t you remember? Don’t you see? The gisaeng asked in his mother’s voice and he felt something lift over his eyes, as if some veil had been cast off. He was looking at himself now. He felt the breath catch in his chest, as if a thousand different knives stabbed his lungs because the mirror image in front of him was almost the same except for one small detail.

He had no eyes.

They had been gouged out, leaving nothing more than gaping pits of black ichor, red rivulets running down his cheeks. The reflection opened his mouth, gasping at the same time as Yoongi, who brought a shaky hand up to touch his cheeks, to feel for the blood or even poke at the open holes where his eyes used to be. Again, the image mirrored him, and Yoongi let out a bloodcurdling scream, nails digging into the soft flesh of his cheeks because he had no eyes, they were gone, gone, gone and-

“Yoongi!” Hoseok snarled. “Calm *down*!”

His eyes flew open, for real this time, and Yoongi found himself panting in the middle of their bed, blankets and sheets twisted around them as Hoseok held his wrists in his hands, pinning them above Yoongi’s head. Something wet and cool slid down Yoongi’s face. He took long, gulps of air and felt it settle in his lungs with relief. Hoseok was panting too, his face nearly red and eyes wild as he stared down at Yoongi.

“Are you alright? Do you know where you are now?” his mate asked, brow furrowed.

At Yoongi’s nod, the alpha let go of the bruising grip he had used to hold him down and leaned back, settling on their bed and relaxing.

“What happened?” Yoongi blurted out.

Hoseok’s eyes softened, and he cupped Yoongi’s face in his hands, pressed a quick kiss to his forehead. “You were having a nightmare. An awful, terrible nightmare.”

Yoongi felt whatever it was continue to slide down his face and so he wiped it away with the back of his hand. Looking down, he saw that the skin there was smeared red.

“A mirror,” Yoongi whispered, horrified. “Give me a mirror, quick!”

His mate complied, reaching over to their bedside and offering the small hand mirror to Yoongi. “It’s not that bad,” Hoseok reasoned. “Just a small scratch. Really, it’s nothing!”

Yoongi almost dared not look, afraid he would find gaping pits of swirling black and red staring back at him, but Hoseok's assurances steeled his nerves. Indeed, it was like his mate said. There was only a small cut near the corner of his left eye, and yet the whole area looked as if it had been rubbed raw, as if something had scraped at it diligently.

Yoongi thought of his hands and how in the dream they had sunk into his face. "Did I...?" he trailed off.

Hoseok winced at the question, frowning, but he slowly nodded his head. "I felt your distress through the bond, so I stopped you before you could do any real damage. What happened in your nightmare?"

Yoongi set the mirror aside and wrapped his arms around himself, shivering. His mate pulled him close, wrapping an arm around his shoulders. "It wasn't a nightmare," the omega protested, voice weak. "They were memories...signs..."

His alpha stiffened. "What do you mean?" Hoseok asked, brow furrowed. "Does this have something to do with your mother?"

"It does," Yoongi nodded his head and took one of Hoseok's hands in his own. He looked into his mate's warm brown eyes, pleading with him to understand what he was about to say next. "After my heat comes, I need to go to her. To speak with her and see what all this means. Please."

For a moment, Hoseok was silent and that tiny, insecure part of Yoongi feared he might get angry or even refuse, but there was no fire that raged through their bond, only a warm current of longing. Hoseok smiled rather sadly and nodded. "Alright," the alpha agreed. "Whatever you need to do. I'll support you no matter what."

That aching fondness nestled itself deep inside Yoongi's heart, and the omega once again wondered what he had ever done to deserve a man like Jung Hoseok.

Chapter End Notes

ooohhhh, yoongi has got more powers than he thought :> but at what cost will they come :o

ok so this chapter might have been confusing/a bit of an info dump but i hope things are a little more clear, at least in regards to the phoenix marks, what they do (seal a god), and a little more backstory behind the generation that came before them!! next two chapters will be the resolution to vminkook and we are BACK TO NAMJIN NATION YEEHAW!!!

i did the best that i could with this chapter and i'll probably get a little more personal on my twitter in regards to where i'm going to take Rising Sun in the future, so watch out for that!!

(don't worry, no hiatus or abandonment or anything like that! I'll just be talking about some plot stuff and personal stuff :)) but if you guys are ok with me posting an author's note in the future about it too (instead of just making a thread about it on twitter) or even if that would be more convenient, please let me know in the comments!! i don't want people to be tricked up and think that i'm updating when it's

just an author's note(that's the only reason i'm hesitant), but honestly if you guys don't care and you wanna know what's going on without following me on twitter then just let me know and i will be sure to follow through!!!

Reconciliation

Chapter Summary

Taehyung, Jimin, and Jeongguk have a chat. Seokjin gets a few answers to his problem and prepares for the storm that's coming his way.

Chapter Notes

i'm sorry for taking so long...this should've been out two weeks ago, but the chapter accidentally got deleted and after that i was really upset that i had to rewrite all of it and i was just not in a good place, especially with my crazy work schedule....i'm really sorry for the inconvenience!!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Though he was nowhere near as cunning or insightful as his brother, that did not mean Taehyung was an idiot. He would have liked to have sat in on the same lessons as Seokjin, to have been taught more of etiquette and language than to have his attention constantly fixed on his sword. He was an alpha, so it was his duty to be fierce and firm, to fight first and ask questions later.

His father liked to host tournaments, and he liked more to see his son in the arena, beating other alphas left and right. Whenever the duel seemed to be a fight to the death, King Hyunseok would sit on the edge of his seat, his dark, fathomless eyes staring inside Taehyung's soul.

Taehyung did not like killing, but he knew his father did. So when he participated in these duels, he made sure to turn away as his sword sunk itself deep into the gut of the poor man in front of him, if only so that his father could not see the grimace on his face, the slight wobbling of his lips.

Taehyung was an alpha, but a broken one.

He busied himself with whatever new hobby caught his interest, hid himself in brothels and taverns as he crafted an image that his father might like. If he knew his son was visiting such establishments and enjoying himself, then surely the king would think he had raised a perfect son, a perfect alpha.

King Hyunseok did not need to know that Taehyung had taken up sewing and painting at the brothels he visited, that he had given his heart away to his latest conquest, that he planned to start a new life with him.

Taehyung had thought he'd be able to leave all of it behind, and yet -

Jimin had refused him in the end.

As if Taehyung cared that much about his supposed birthright, about his own father's love, a black, oppressive thing that stifled him. He could remember his father smiling as he handed Taehyung the knife and told him he had a choice.

A crown or Seokjin.

Nothing or everything.

Taehyung was no idiot.

He knew what his banishment meant, the lesson that his father hoped exile would teach. The only thing Taehyung learned was that he would never see his father again. He would not bow or break simply by living in squalor. It was as if the king had forgotten that those living conditions had been where he'd lived for the first nine years of his life.

Taehyung thought of the empty village he had met when he returned to his hometown. Yerin had told him his mother had committed suicide, that his grandfather had been lost to the pox, and yet she'd never thought to mention that around that time many years ago, the whole village had been razed by the mad king. Taehyung learned this from the neighboring locals nearby, and the clouds over his eyes dispersed.

He could still remember his mother's hands as she gently carded them through his hair, smell the scent of her in the wind. Her hands were calloused and firm. They belonged to a strong woman, a fierce woman. One who would not commit suicide at the loss of her son. She would have fought tooth and nail to get him back, but she couldn't fight when she was dead.

Confined to his rooms in the Jeon wing of the palace, with nothing but his own memories for company, Taehyung had come to an understanding of sorts. He looked back and saw things differently, saw them tinged a different hue than they'd once been.

His father was no longer the kind man who occasionally had a fit of madness. Instead he was a paranoid, scheming thing. An unloveable creature who treated whoever he encountered as nothing more than a tool, a thing for him to treasure or break.

Seokjin was not as strong as he'd once seemed. His shoulders were weighed down by paranoia and plots and protecting Taehyung from any of their father's ire. The lengths at which he kept Taehyung even now...started to make sense.

Jimin was too unsure of Taehyung's love. It was as if he didn't understand how much he truly meant to Taehyung, his eyes downcast with uncertainty and self-doubt. He wanted Taehyung to be happy, and yet he could not comprehend that Taehyung was his happiest when he was with him.

When it came to his mate, Taehyung did not like to dwell on the memories for too long. His analysis had him recoiling in fear as shamed welled up within his chest, desperately wanting to avert his attention.

He had not treated Jeongguk very well. It was not an opinion, but a fact. He understood that Jeongguk had done what he'd thought best in their desperate situation, had treated their union as a last resort rather than an elaborate scheme to entrap Taehyung. Did Jeongguk care for Taehyung? Undoubtedly. The omega would have never offered up his neck if he hadn't cared for him.

Yet Taehyung would not have been surprised if that affection had started to waver in the face of Taehyung's indecisiveness.

Even now Taehyung had begun to smell a familiar scent on Jeongguk, one that made his heart ache in all sorts of ways, but he said nothing. It was not his place to. Jeongguk had looked so much happier as of late. His eyes seemed to shine, his cheeks had a healthy flush to them, and he was smiling more often than not.

Taehyung would not dare to disturb his happiness. He did not want to. It made /him/ unspeakably happy, the thought of his two precious people together, finding joy in one another's company. How could his heart ache of envy whenever their friendship delighted each other so?

Taehyung remembered Jeongguk's words from so long ago, the confession of his failed attempts at courting a fellow omega, a servant at the palace. Taehyung began to wonder, began to even suspect that there was something else to Jeongguk's meetings with Jimin. His mate's scent was getting stronger, thicker as his next heat approached, and Taehyung couldn't say he'd be surprised if Jeongguk decided he did not want to spend it with him, but Jimin instead.

The thought upset him, but only in the sense that he would have to be parted from his omega in a time when Jeongguk should have wanted or needed him most. It was wrong to deny his omega of his presence during such a time, but if it was what said omega wanted most then...

Taehyung would stay away if asked.

On a clear, sunny morning, Taehyung decided he had had enough of being cooped up in his rooms and wanted to go for a walk. The guard posted outside his door was required to go with, to keep an eye on Taehyung when Jeongguk was not there, and so the alpha approached the gardens with his shadow trailing behind.

There were two sweet familiar smells wafting through the air, he quickly noticed, and Taehyung found his feet moving on their own in the direction of the scents. He heard the laughter before he even saw them, and an unbidden grin curved its way onto his face.

It was Jeongguk and Jimin.

The two of them were standing in the middle of an open area, with Jeongguk's back facing Jimin's front, only a centimeter between them. Jimin delicately held Jeongguk's wrists in his own tiny hands, and his hands moved down, running down the other omega's arms smoothly as he grabbed a hold of his forearms and positioned them a certain way.

Jimin leaned forward, mouth close to the curve of Jeongguk's neck as he muttered something in his ear, too low for Taehyung to catch. In the next moment, Jimin looked up and his green eyes caught Taehyung's.

Jimin let go of Jeongguk as if he'd been burned, taking a step back, and his cheeks flushed.

"Your Highness!" he greeted.

Jeongguk's head snapped in Taehyung's direction, and his face fell. It made Taehyung regret seeking out their scents, if only for the discomfort Jeongguk must have felt at his sudden appearance.

Taehyung inclined his head to Jimin, though his eyes lingered, drinking in the sight of him.

"What are you doing here?" Jeongguk asked, perhaps a little too sullenly, for Jimin elbowed him sharply.

"I wanted to go for a walk and I heard the two of you talking. My curiosity got the better of me. Since it seems like I've interrupted, I'll be taking my leave," Taehyung simply said, shrugging his shoulders.

He turned to leave, but a sudden cry had him stopping in his tracks and turning back.

“Wait!”

Jimin’s fists were clenched at his side, and his expression was twisted into something complicated. He stared at the ground, perhaps unable to meet Taehyung’s eyes, before suddenly he looked up.

“Would you like to stay and watch, Your Highness?” Jimin asked nervously.

Taehyung was rather taken aback and so he did not answer right away. He merely blinked owlshly, jaw dropping. After a few moments, he collected himself and cleared his throat.

“I’d hate to intrude,” the alpha said truthfully. Because he didn’t want to spoil whatever happiness his mate and former fiance had found, and if he just inserted himself, he would ruin everything.

He looked to Jeongguk, expecting to see some sort of anger on his face, and yet the expression there surprised him. It was soft and a little nervous, much like Jimin’s. Welcoming.

“We don’t mind,” Jeongguk insisted. “Really, we don’t!”

Taehyung felt his cheeks warm, his chest aching. He nodded his head, and as he took a seat at one of the benches in the small courtyard, Jeongguk dismissed the guard that was at his side. The two omegas slowly resumed their lessons, and Taehyung could not help but hope that there was still a chance he could clean up the mess he’d made.

After another hour or two of dancing, eventually Jeongguk and Jimin tired enough to end the lessons for the day. “You’re getting better and better every day,” Jimin praised, panting. “I think one day you might even surpass me!”

Jeongguk shook his head frantically, wide-eyed. “I could never!” he breathed.

Taehyung laughed. “You’re both amazing. I fear I would trip over my feet if I even tried to copy your moves.”

Jimin’s already flushed face darkened even more. “Oh, please!” he scolded. “All it takes is time and effort. Anyone can do it if they just practice enough.”

“It helps to have a teacher, though, doesn’t it? I could not think of a better teacher for Jeongguk than you,” Taehyung murmured.

“Taehyung is right! You’re amazing, Jimin,” Jeongguk praised, beaming.

Jimin looked away, perhaps overwhelmed by all of the praise, and quietly told them that it was time for him to leave and get back to the Royal Consort’s side. Taehyung sobered up at the mention of his brother, and he and his mate bid farewell to the omega, then continued on their own way back to their rooms.

“There are not as many guards anymore,” Taehyung noted, as he shut the door behind them. He grimaced. “But I suppose they’re just not in sight, huh?”

Jeongguk nodded his head and smiled, though his displeasure was clear. “My father has eyes watching at all times, even if they are not the most obvious.”

“And what does your father think about your lessons with Jimin?” Taehyung asked suddenly.

Jeongguk paused for a moment. "He must approve, or else they would have already been stopped."

He looked to Taehyung nervously. "But perhaps I should slowly stop my lessons. I would not like for my father to get any ideas."

Taehyung's breath caught in his throat. He glanced over and met Jeongguk's dark, wide eyes. He took a step closer and was pleased to find the omega did not retreat. "What sort of ideas would he get?"

Jeongguk shivered. Taehyung's voice seemed deeper than usual, as if it hid a special sort of intent within it. "Ideas that I am engaging in behavior inappropriate for my station."

"And who says it is inappropriate?" Taehyung's eyes darkened. He took another step closer, till he was a mere centimeter away from Jeongguk, so close that he might as well be flush against his body.

Something in Jeongguk's gut churned, a hot and heavy feeling that he had not felt towards his mate in a while.

"Everyone," he whispered.

He closed his eyes and waited for Taehyung to say something, to perhaps berate him or speak about propriety or an omega's duty or whatever else he could scold him about. Because surely that must be where this sudden desire came from, a need to mark one's territory, to claim it when threatened. Taehyung had hidden his anger and jealousy well, if Jeongguk had only noticed it now, but Taehyung's next words sent all of those thoughts careening to a halt.

"Everyone but me," Taehyung whispered.

Jeongguk's eyes flew open, and he met Taehyung's gaze, which was so very dark and yet more clear than it had ever been

"You - " he started, but Taehyung had already wrapped his arms around him and covered his next words with a kiss.

It felt so very different than all the times before. It seemed as if there was a yearning and an understanding, a mutual wish between them. When they parted, Taehyung began to speak. "I have treated you poorly. I'm sorry. If you'll give me another chance, I swear to never do it again."

Jeongguk, who was a little overwhelmed by everything that was suddenly happened, took a moment to respond. He shook his head. "I've treated you poorly, too. I've made decisions on my own and swore that they were for your sake, but I never even asked...."

He trailed off.

Taehyung shook his head. "It doesn't matter. We'll do better from now on. We'll talk to each other."

Jeongguk agreed and yet his heart felt pained. "About Jimin," he began, but found he didn't know how to finish. There were so many things to be said about Jimin, so many important things, and yet he could not get even a single one out right now."

Taehyung took a deep breath. "We will fix this thing between us. Then we will speak about Jimin. It would not be fair to him otherwise, to try and drag him into something broken and expect him to hold it all together."

What Taehyung said had merit to it, and Jeongguk understood that their priorities were the same. They would take care of each other, just as they would take care of Jimin. It made Jeongguk so happy, so unspeakably happy, that the next thing he knew he was crying.

Taehyung fussed over him anxiously, wiping away tears and holding him to his chest as he asked what was wrong.

“Nothing,” Jeongguk finally managed to say between sobs. He sniffled. “I’m just...I’m so happy!”

Whatever worry had gripped Taehyung’s heart quickly dissolved, and he found himself running a hand through Jeongguk’s silky black hair, lips curving up into a gentle smile.

“So am I,” Taehyung murmured.

He realized that the only thing that could make him happier, was if he could share this joy with his older brother, if he could proudly tell him all that had transpired, and so the thought of Seokjin had his smile fading, yet his arms tightened around his husband and he pressed a kiss to the top of his head.

He could be happy without Seokjin in his life.

He would have to be.

“Little bird,” Jessi greeted, smiling as she drew back the hood of her cloak. “How long it’s been!”

“About a year, give or take,” Seokjin drawled. He did not rise to greet her.

Jessi noticed that his skin was much paler, more sickly looking, with harsh bags under his eyes. “I would ask if you’ve been well, but it seems that’s not the case.”

The Imperial Consort gave a hollow laugh. “Straight to the point,” he remarked. “How nice. But I wonder if you can really fix my ailment or not.”

“Doubting my abilities already?” Jessi tilted her head to the side.

Seokjin smiled. “I don’t even know your abilities.”

This time it was Jessi who laughed. She waved her hand. “Fair enough.”

Jimin pulled out a chair for her at the table Seokjin was sitting at and gestured for her to take a seat. Once she did, she stretched her ringed fingers out and then clenched them into fists. The pot of tea on the table shattered, spraying clay shards and tea all over the tablecloth, before it seemed as if time went back, and the pieces flew in reverse, coming together along with the tea until the pot was whole again.

Seokjin and Jimin both startled, and Jimin rubbed at his eyes, unable to believe what he had just seen.

“I am a witch,” Jessi admitted. “Though a very minor one! My family line is known for using runes and talismans, but a great-grandmother of mine was blessed with the Sight and so my own precognition comes and goes. If there’s a curse or some other magic at work that’s keeping you from having a child, I’ll be able to tell.

“A witch,” Seokjin said slowly. “Are there many other witches out there? If in the end, you can’t fix my problem, then is there someone else who can?”

Jessi shook her head sadly. “There used to be many great covens, but the bloodline has started to die out. Not many witches are born anymore, and even our White Witch- “

Jessi stopped herself and cleared her throat. “It’s no matter. Just know that there are perhaps three total in the capital, and around ten others spread throughout villages in the countryside. Your other options are close to none.”

Jimin winced. What Jessi said was similar to what Yerin had already told him.

“Alright,” Seokjin straightened his shoulders and fixed his cold eyes on Jessi. “Then tell me what’s wrong.”

Jessi held out a hand in the direction of Seokjin’s stomach and a faint glow began to surround her fingers. Seokjin shifted in his seat, the hair on the back of his neck standing up as he felt something warm move in his stomach. That same glow around Jessi’s fingers was mirrored on Seokjin’s midsection.

Jessi seemed to be concentrating, her brows furrowing and nose scrunching as she wiggled her fingers this way and that, as if she were probing for something. Jimin remained by Seokjin’s side, anxiously waiting for the results which weren’t coming any time soon. It took minutes, nearly an hour, before finally Jessi sat back, relaxing her hand, and the glow disappeared.

She leaned her head back, wiping the sweat from her brow as she sighed heavily. “Your wrist, my prince,” she instructed. “Hand it over please. I saw something rather interesting.”

Seokjin, who had long become bored with just sitting there and watching her facial expressions change, was more than happy to actually move and so he offered his wrist without another word. Jessi drew his sleeve back and felt for his pulse.

After a few moments, she spoke in wonder.

“My prince,” the witch murmured. “It seems as though...you are already pregnant.”

Seokjin froze. “That’s impossible. My last heat was three months ago and then I miscarried. I haven’t had a heat since then.”

“Have you not shared the same bed as your king?” Jessi asked, raising an eyebrow.

Seokjin was silent for a moment. Finally, he said with much reluctance, “It’s nearly impossible to conceive outside of a heat.”

Jessi let go of his wrist and shook her head. “Apparently not for you,” she remarked softly. “Your first pregnancy was like this, yes? I’d say the bond between you and Namjoon is rather strong if you can conceive so easily. That or the gods desperately want you to have a child. It must be predestined by the Heavens.”

Seokjin scoffed. “What gods? The ones that are sealed thousands of feet beneath my family’s mausoleum? I doubt I have some higher power invested so heavily in the state of my womb.”

Jessi only smiled. “You’d be surprised, my prince. If Fate wills it so, then so shall it be. However...”

“However what?” Seokjin winced at the strain in his own voice.

“This one is not meant to be,” Jessi informed him sadly.

Seokjin felt his vision blur and he retracted his wrist slowly, fingers curling into a fist on his lap. “Oh, I see,” he said, but it felt like it was someone else saying it. Seokjin had to squeeze his eyes shut so that no tears would leak out.

“What do you mean it’s not meant to be?” Jimin snarled from his side, hands on his hips. He was nearly frothing at the mouth. “You just told us the Heavens will make sure he has a child, and yet now you’re saying they’ll take it away? Just like that? What a joke! A fraud! You must not know what you’re talking about.”

Jessi frowned and stiffened, clearly offended at being called a fraud, yet she remained calm. “I only mean that this one will be like the other two. There’s a block on His Highness’s womb, a sort of curse that’s trying to stop this child from being born. Because His Highness is already pregnant and the curse is still there, then there is no way the baby in his belly right now will ever come to be.”

“How was I even cursed in the first place?” Seokjin asked darkly. If he ever found out who it was, he’d pay the caster back tenfold.

“A witch, of course,” Jessi said, but she would not meet either of their eyes. “Though I have to wonder just when it was that you met her. It seems like it was cast long ago, before you ever even presented.”

Seokjin closed his eyes once more, head aching as the silver-eyed woman came to mind. Her claw-like hands reaching forward to dig at his belly. What was it she had said?

“Help! Help, you’ve got to get me out of here before he comes back! Please! I’ll do anything!”

He shook his head and ignored the ache, the faint images that he saw. They were nothing more than illusions. “I don’t remember,” he lied.

“So what do we do?” Jimin asked, throwing his hands in the air helplessly. “Can’t we just break the curse and save the child?”

Jessi shook her head. “The magic is too complex. Even if I break the curse now, the child is still lost. It may be live, but there will be no soul. The curse has already blocked a soul from ever taking root.”

“So we wait,” Seokjin murmured. He pressed a hand to his stomach, as if hoping to feel a faint kick or beat, yet there was nothing. There never was. “We wait for me to miscarry, then we try to break the curse.”

“It will be the last one, Your Highness,” Jessi assured him, almost pleading. “I can promise you that. Once this last one has run its course, I’ll be able to break the curse, and you’ll soon have a live, healthy child in your arms. I swear!”

“Jin,” Jimin murmured, a warning. He did not trust this woman as much as Yerin clearly did, so he remained skeptical of her words.

Seokjin inclined his head, acknowledging what Jimin hoped to get across. He turned to Jessi once more. “Swear?” he repeated softly. “You would swear it?”

Jessi nodded. “Most definitely, Your Highness!”

“I’m sure you’re aware of the penalty for lying to a member of the royal family?” Seokjin’s voice was covered in frost.

Jessi shivered and averted her eyes. A sudden heavy weight fell on her shoulders, and even though she was the one with the advantage here, technically armed with her magic, she felt very powerless on the receiving end of Seokjin's gaze.

"Of course, Your Highness."

"Then you're aware that you're swearing on your very own life?" Seokjin finished.

Jessi understood. If Seokjin did not give birth to the live, healthy child she had promised within half of a year, then she would be sentenced to death. The witch took a deep breath. She thought of the favor she owed Yerin and how much Namjoon himself must wish for a child. Finally she took a good look at the omega in front of her, the shadow that fell on his face and made his scar more pronounced.

"On my own life, I swear it." Jessi said, bowing before the Imperial Consort.

Once Seokjin spent his first heat with Namjoon, things had been different. It seemed as if they had both agreed to a stalemate, to get along as best they could. Namjoon had treated him so tenderly, had come when asked, so how could Seokjin's heart not be swayed in the slightest?

His alpha had not left him alone, and it was more than Seokjin could ever ask for. After the haze of his heat had dispersed, Namjoon had one simple request.

"Dine with me from now on," Namjoon asked, pressing a kiss to the knuckles of Seokjin's left hand. "Take your evening meals with me instead of just your servants."

Seokjin had flushed, but agreed. It was a way for them to spend time together whereas before they would not, a way to catch up on what their days had been like. Namjoon always spoke of state matters, new laws that would be implemented or how the talks with the Qing empire were going. Seokjin himself had nothing that interesting to talk about, since his days were rather boring, but he usually brought up whatever gossip he had overheard from Ru and Leah.

It was easy for Seokjin to waver in the face of Namjoon's sincerity, and he found himself almost falling back into the mindset of Jin the kitchen servant.

But he had learned his lesson and so hardened his heart just as it began to wilt. Especially as the rumors started to drift over into his wing of the palace, rumors that spoke of consorts and concubines and which noble omega had recently caught King Namjoon's eye.

Seokjin would not ever forget his place in the palace, nor could he forget the callous way Namjoon had once treated him.

When Madam Yerin brought him Jae's book and confirmed his nursemaid's traitorous actions, the flames had been fanned. Seokjin now had a list of every single noble family that had turned against his mother, the rightful heir, in favor of the mad king, a fake phoenix.

Half of the Bangtan's forces were on the list.

Lords Jung, Woo and Min had betrayed the Kim family not only once but twice. First it was his mother and then his father. Seokjin almost wanted to laugh, but he feared he would not be able to stop once he started.

Seokjin knew what needed to be done. With his friend Suran as a head cook in the kitchens, it was easy to sprinkle a bit of poison in Lord Woo's wine and Lord Jung's meals gradually, upping the dose one cup or plate at a time. Wasn't it rather poetic, for them to die in such a way?

Seokjin certainly thought so.

The timing of Lord Jung's death had been a coincidence, as Seokjin had not planned on implicating Lord Min Yoongi in the process. The palace's rumor mill had a mind of its own, however, and the damage to Lord Min's reputation had been done without Seokjin's helping hand. The imperial consort quickly told Suran to stop poisoning the patriarchs of the Bangtan Four, having caught on that they now knew of his involvement, and yet Namjoon had still seen fit to give him a reminder.

Seokjin's cheeks flushed thinking back on the encounter, as it had been a harsh, violent thing. Dinner plates had been thrown and precious vases knocked over. Both of them refused to back down, too stubborn and prideful, and their anger had culminated into Seokjin pressing Namjoon down onto his bed, movements rough and harsh as they fucked.

The next morning, Namjoon had pressed tender kisses to each and every one of Seokjin's bruises and scratches, apologizing for how harsh he had been, and Seokjin agreed that he would no longer scheme to poison anyone in the Bangtan court, feeling satisfied in a way he hadn't felt in a very long time.

They'd been amicable towards each other since then, and Seokjin had put the incident out of his mind. However...

It had been close to a year since Namjoon and Seokjin were married, and yet there was nothing to show for it. Leah told him one night in a rather worried voice that Lord Woo was inquiring for the physician to predict his daughter's next heat, that some of the courtiers were banding together and causing a ruckus over the lack of an heir.

The news had him yearning for bittersweet memories, and Seokjin searched for Namjoon's gift, holding it in his hands carefully as he sat lost in thought. The pads of his fingers smoothed over the stone, feeling the dips and curves of the engravings.

"What should we do?" Leah asked, wringing her hands.

For a moment, Seokjin was silent.

"Young Mistress Woo is little more than a child. She's barely seventeen," Ru huffed. She, on the other hand, seemed less worried than Leah. Because she had once served Woo Hyewon attentively, she understood the girl's temperament, and perhaps thought it was a deterrent.

Ru shook her head, frowning. "There's no way the king will spare her so much as a glance. If anything, we should be worried about Young Mistress Min!"

Ah, yes. Min Duran. The girl had made herself rather scarce since Seokjin and Namjoon had married, but she had continued to remain a thorn in the back of Seokjin's mind, ever present and sharp. Yoongi had sent his cousin back to his estate for a few months, but many servants whispered they'd received orders to clean out her quarters, since she would soon return to the palace.

"They are the only two you've heard of, yes?" Seokjin asked in a quiet voice.

"The only two that seem to be a threat," Jimin spoke up, confirming what Seokjin feared. "There's been talks of other omegas from minor clans, but none of them have any backers behind them. On the other hand, Woo Hyewon is Lord Woo's heir and Min Duran has supporters from both the Jeon

and Song families."

"I see," Seokjin murmured. He set the necklace in his hands back into its box and shut the lid with a click. "Ru?"

The omega lifted her head up, awaiting orders. Seokjin glanced over to her and smiled, a cool, unpleasant thing. "Tell Suran to proceed as planned. Target Hyewon and Duran both. If any other flies start buzzing, we'll smash them, too."

Ru bowed.

"Is there anything you need me to do?" Leah asked anxiously.

"Write a letter for me," Seokjin's gaze moved towards Jimin and he narrowed his eyes. He settled a hand on his stomach, and the smile slowly disappeared from his face. "Jimin will know who it's for."

Jimin and Leah both gave a nod, and Seokjin turned away, hiding the necklace back inside one of his drawers.

"Are you sure about this?" Jimin frowned. "There's no going back. Something like this..."

"It's what needs to be done," Seokjin proclaimed, unyielding in the slightest. He squeezed his eyes shut for a moment. Perhaps others would be worried about accumulating bad karma or offending some sort of god, but Seokjin had done worse things than this and lived.

If he himself was already damned, then why shouldn't he drag a few others down with him?

Besides, it was the only way he could protect what was his. Seokjin *always* took care of the things he cherished. This was no exception.

Chapter End Notes

OK JUST AN UPDATE ON SOME THINGS I WANNA TALK ABOUT!!

I do have a definite outline for the rest of the story now that won't change no matter. I also want to admit that I did confirm some things on my twitter. I said a few minors things were NOT going to happen, but now they ARE going to happen and this is because I believe that having them happen will resolve the conflict more smoothly. (message me on CC if you wanna know what i'm talking about!)

As we approach the ending of Rising Sun, I just want to say thank you to everyone who is still reading it, even if it is flawed. This is currently the longest fic I've ever written. I used to struggle to write 30k words in two years but in a year and a half i have managed to write over 200k. I guess I just want to acknowledge that this whole story has been a learning process for me, and I think that overall it has made me a better writer.

What I will never change is the fact that I have promised a happy ending, that namjin, vminkook, and sope are going to be happy together at the end, even though there may be some more bumps along the way.

Thank you to everyone that continues to love and support Rising Sun as much as me!!
Even though my update schedule is always kind of all over the place, I will try my best to finish this story by the end of 2019. lmao let's see if i can actually do it!!

As always follow my Twitter for updates if you would like, as well as sending me messages on curiouscat if you have any!

love you all and hopefully see you soon :)

On the Same Page

Chapter Summary

Namjoon goes beyond Seokjin's expectations.

Chapter Notes

tw: mention of forced sterilization

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It took Lord Woo's scheme two weeks to come to fruition. Seokjin heard from Leah that Lord Woo and a few other lords and ladies would file a petition to the king, urging him to fill the palace with a harem, or at least one other spouse. The matter of an heir was urgent. If his current husband could not provide, then they needed to find others who could. The future of the Kim dynasty depended on it.

Seokjin scoffed at the predictability of it all. Ever since he married Namjoon, he knew this day would come. When he heard that today was the day the officials chose to beg the king for more brides, he remained unbothered. He'd taken into account every possible scenario, and he no longer needed to fear losing his position.

He sat outside at a table with Ru and Leah, listening to Lady Hae play the gayageum. Her maid stood nearby, holding little Seongsu who babbled along with his mother's music.

Jimin was away with his brother and Jeon Jeongguk, as the three of them had begun to reconcile these last few months. Seokjin had begrudgingly given his approval for whatever arrangement Jimin sought with the mated pair. As long as everyone involved was happy, it mattered little to him.

Happiness. The word itself tasted like ashes in Seokjin's mouth. How could he possibly be happy, knowing his alpha would soon take others to bed? No, he would endure and be content with what he had. There was no room for happiness in his life anymore.

He calmly took a sip of tea, wrinkling his nose at the taste. It was packed full of vitamins and other sorts of nonsense, a concoction that Jessi had prescribed to him now that he had finished passing his third miscarriage.

Though he felt a familiar inkling within him, a sort of restless that he could not place, he was hesitant to hope for more. A positive outlook had not served him very well this last year.

The last note of the gayageum rang out as Lady Hae finished her piece. Seokjin clapped politely, while his two servants began to fawn over the lady, complimenting her skills.

"Oh, my! You sound just like a professional!" Leah remarked.

Lady Hae smiled, but it didn't quite reach her eyes. "My husband had paid for only the best tutors to teach me when we married. I knew little skills or arts, and he didn't want me to...embarrass myself at court."

"All of that effort paid off," Seokjin allowed her a hint of praise, nodding his head. "The only other person I know who can come close to your skill is Lord Min Yoongi himself."

Lady Hae blinked. "How curious that you mention him..."

"What do you mean?"

The younger woman leaned back. "Only that I was going to speak to you about him once we'd finished here. He gave me a message for you, though I don't know if you'll be very pleased to hear it."

Seokjin straightened his shoulders. He wondered just what it was that Yoongi wanted from him now. "Go on then," he commanded. "Let's hear it."

Lady Hae frowned. "He said that what we've feared will soon come to pass. Do you have any idea what he means?"

The light chuckle escaped Seokjin before he could stop it. Ru and Leah both frowned, inching closer to him as he laughed, and confusion was written all over Lady Hae's face. Once Seokjin stopped laughing, he explained what was so funny to him.

"He's trying to warn me, I guess. About the harem situation."

Lady Hae stiffened immediately, and even Ru, who was normally so quiet, spoke up in a furious voice. "Is he being sarcastic? His own cousin is one of the candidates. Surely he must be mocking you!"

Seokjin shook his head. "No, that's not quite Lord Min's style," he remarked softly. "I only thought it was funny because he assumed I didn't already know. Or perhaps..."

Did Yoongi know that he knew? Was this all some sort of test?

"Perhaps what?" Lady Hae asked, arching an eyebrow.

"It's nothing," Seokjin dismissed the thought. "Whatever the case there's no need for me to be afraid anymore."

Leah and Ru bowed their heads, faces pale and solemn. Lady Hae caught onto their attitudes and inquired as to the meaning behind Seokjin's words.

"I only mean that I need not fear these brides that Namjoon brings into the palace. Even if they secure his love they will fare no better than I. I've made sure of it," Seokjin raised the cup of tea to his lips and took a sip, smiling at the look of horror that dawned on Lady Hae.

"Oh, Seokjin," Lady Hae murmured. "You didn't..."

"I did!" the consort declared, slamming his cup down with a clink. "All it took was a cup or two of tea, just like this, and the branches were trimmed. If my womb is broken and useless, then why should I not raze the wombs of those who try to replace me? It's just as my mother did before me!"

It had been oh-so easy to speak with Suran, letting down the many masks and walls that he had

built up and spilling his feelings to the beta. He knew it was only if he was emotional that she would listen to such a heartless demand. He'd pleaded with her, asking for the teas of Woo Hyewon and Min Duran to be laced with the right sort of root to promote sterility.

Suran had grabbed his hands in her own and promised she'd do everything in her power to see it done, and she did just that.

Lord Woo had squashed any of the rumors that circulated, but a month ago there had been word that Hyewon's heat did not come as planned, yet there was no way she was pregnant either.

Seokjin assumed Min Duran had suffered similar side effects.

For a moment, Lady Hae was silent. She looked very unsure of herself when she spoke next. "Seokjin, do you think this is the right way to go about it all? I mean, they haven't even entered the harem yet and you've already ruined them. What happens if Namjoon doesn't take them as brides? They'll get married to someone else, but they'll never have children. Aren't you afraid that - "

Seokjin fixed her with a look. "Please, tell me what I should be afraid of, Lady Hae! I find your sudden conscience rather alarming in fact. You were so pleased when I swore vengeance, but now that I am following through, you've gotten cold feet?"

"I only worry," Hae began in a low voice. "That in your state, you may be damning yourself. The gods are fickle creatures, and if you continue doing what you're doing then the sort of karma you invoke will be - "

Seokjin scoffed and cut her off, voice filled with venom. "Gods! Ha. There are no gods anymore. Surely you must know that, Lady Hae?"

Seokjin stood, his servants following suit, and bid goodbye to Lady Hae. "If you'll excuse me, I'd like to be in the privacy of my own rooms when I receive the king's edict."

Lady Hae fiddled her hands and nodded her head, unable to reply verbally. Her son soon made a loud cry, as if sensing his mother's temperamental mood, and so her attention was diverted.

Once Seokjin had exited the gardens and entered the palace, standing in one of the cold, long hallways of the palace, his composure slipped. "Why am I always in the wrong?" he muttered.

"Lady Hae just doesn't understand," Leah assured him, wrinkling her nose. "Her husband is dead now, and she has a happy, healthy son of her own."

Ru nodded, her eyes tired as she looped her arm through Seokjin's. "You have already suffered. There is no child for you. Why should you fear that the gods might curse you with infertility for what you have done, when they've already done just that?"

"If her husband had taken another mate, if she was in the same situation as you, then I think she would do the same thing!" Leah declared.

Would she? Seokjin wondered.

Seokjin's mother had done the same as well. Seokjin knew this from a very young age, and Jae's journal had even gone into detail on the matter. To protect Seokjin's claim, she had to preemptively strike, to get rid of any obstacles that might get in the way.

Yet it was all for nothing.

All for her careful planning - it meant nothing.

The mad king somehow had Taehyung, a bastard son, and Seokjin didn't even sit on the throne now. It belonged to Namjoon, and he had been relegated to a mere consort. Something to be thrown away and forgotten about.

Namjoon had not forgotten about him, though. Not yet anyways. They took their meals together, and treated whatever it was between them carefully. Their relationship was a fragile, gentle thing, and so Seokjin was hesitant, afraid that at any moment Namjoon would finally decide that he just wasn't worth his time.

Just as his father had done to his mother.

Seokjin understood his mother now, and he believed her to be a rather pitiful woman, much like himself. When he thought of the life she could have with the nameless beta girl she had so desperately loved, he felt guilty for even existing, for getting in the way of that happiness.

Us Kims are doomed to misery, Seokjin thought. He stood in front of a mirror and slowly untied his garments so that he might push them off of his shoulders and get a good look at his back. The phoenix was a vivid red now, and even the skin surrounding it seemed irritated.

As Seokjin's mating mark healed, his birthmark became more and more temperamental. He wondered if it was because the demon was angry the mark on his neck was healing, so it lashed out at him in the only way it could: burning his back.

You are acting like a child, Seokjin scolded, but the demon remained silent, as it had regularly started to do as of late.

His head began to ache and Seokjin slowly undid the elaborate braids and twists that Jimin had done for him this morning, hoping it would alleviate some of the pain. His hair fell down, reaching past his shoulders. He ran his fingers through it carefully, undoing some of the tangles. He felt as if was wrong to cut it now, so he simply let it grow.

He looked down at the box on his dresser. For a moment, he hesitated to open it. All he did nowadays was stare at the damn thing, too afraid to even wear it.

He looked at it once more, turned it over and actually read the engravings for once-

Actually. Read. The. Engravings.

Joon & Jin.

"From Kim Namjoon to Kim Seokjin," Namjoon had told him, and yet it seemed like Seokjin had misunderstood.

Something wet began to roll down his face, warm tears decorating his cheeks. He felt a sort of yearning in his chest, a fleeting moment where he wished things could go back to how they were so long ago.

Namjoon, he thought, distressed. *What has become of us?*

Jae's journal weighed heavy on his mind. The past betrayals and deceit that Seokjin felt he had to correct, his own confusing feelings about Namjoon, and the daunting realization that he would soon be replaced.

In front of others, perhaps he could remain cool and unbothered, but here in the privacy of his own room, he could let himself actually experience the despair he felt at the thought of Namjoon loving

someone else.

It was a culmination of far too many complicated emotions. All of them made Seokjin feel as if he were bursting at the seams, and he felt so much older than he was. The past two years had taken a toll on him. Living life as a servant versus living life as a consort.

He realized in that moment that he was very, very tired.

Ru entered with the laundry and immediately began to fuss over him. “What’s wrong, Seokjin? Has something happened?”

Seokjin wiped away the tears from his face, though his eyes still remained red and suspiciously wet. “I’ve just been thinking too much,” he insisted. “It’s nothing really.”

There were three knocks on the door, a warning sound, before Leah poked her head in.

“Seokjin!” the other girl hissed in warning, looking panicked. “The king - “

She never got to finish, for the king himself pushed passed her, eyes burning something fierce. “Jin,” Namjoon called softly. “What’s the matter? I could feel it. Something has upset you.”

Ru positioned herself between Namjoon and Seokjin, standing up straight and tall, but she was nearly a foot shorter than Namjoon, who towered over most. “Ru, Leah,” Seokjin started quietly. “The two of you are dismissed.”

Ru looked back at him helplessly, as if asking if he were sure. Seokjin gave her a curt nod, and with a sigh, the other girl’s posture relaxed. She grabbed Leah by the hand and the two of them left Namjoon and Seokjin to themselves.

“What are you doing here?” Seokjin asked, a little alarmed. “Court should still be in session, should it not?”

Namjoon waved his hand. “It ended early today,” he said off-handedly. “I was headed towards the library when I felt your distress. It was...the first time I felt it, so I thought you might be in danger.”

Seokjin could name at least three other times he had been distressed this past year, so to hear Namjoon say that this one had been the first warranted a sigh of relief.

“As you can see,” Seokjin gestured to himself. “I’m fine. You can be on your way if you wish. I’m sure you have important things you should be doing right now. People you should be seeing.”

Namjoon narrowed his eyes. He reached forward, taking Seokjin’s hand in one of his own gnarled ones. Just as Seokjin no longer took great pains to cover mark on his face, Namjoon began to stop wearing his gloves. No longer was he ashamed of his scars.

“You are important, Seokjin,” Namjoon insisted earnestly.

Seokjin’s heart swelled, yet he was no fool. Namjoon was surely buttering him up before he hit him with the bad news concerning the harem.

“I was just thinking too much,” he told him what he had told Ru. “You shouldn’t worry about it.”

He made to withdraw from Namjoon’s touch, but the alpha’s grip only tightened. “How can I not worry? Tell me, what were you thinking of?”

His eyes were scorching, and they never left Seokjin’s own.

“I was thinking about a lot of things. About us, about my mother,” Seokjin paused.

He felt as if he had to continue, even if he didn’t want to. He needed the confirmation, no matter how much it would destroy him. After taking a deep breath, he said. “About the harem.”

Namjoon’s grip loosened, and he stared at Seokjin, eyes wide and jaw slack. In the next moment, his face paled. “Seokjin,” he began, almost desperately. “What are you talking about?”

“Did you think I would not find out?” the omega asked, perhaps a little curious at Namjoon’s naivete. “I have eyes and ears of my own in this palace. I know all about what the ministers have demanded of you, Namjoon.”

Namjoon shook his head furiously. “You’ve got it all wrong! Please, just listen to me!”

Seokjin’s face remained emotionless. “It’s been a year, and we have no child. I’m sure they’ve already preached to you about how I must be defective. You need an heir, and I am not providing.”

“Seokjin!” Namjoon pleaded.

But Seokjin would not listen. He turned away from Namjoon, staring at his hands, which rested in his lap.

“It’s alright. I understand. If you fall, then who will take the throne? Certainly not me. I am an omega, and they all hate me. What’s even better is if you have a child with another noble, one that doesn’t have my blood. That way I have no right to regency. It’s for the best,” he finally finished describing this all matter-of-factly, as if it did not bother him in the slightest.

He did not expect warm arms to encircle him, to feel Namjoon’s breath spill across the back of his neck. “You are so smart,” Namjoon sighed, “and yet so foolish. But I understand. Actions have always meant more than words for you, right? Then let me inform you of what I have done.”

“There will never be a harem. Not while I am king. I refused the ministers’ petition and told them exactly this: that you are the only mate I will ever have, and to think otherwise is simply absurd.”

It was like the breaking of a sealed dam, and Seokjin felt raw, exposed. Was he dreaming right now? It certainly felt so. He could not look back and meet Namjoon’s eyes, did not think he could ever meet them again, and he barely dared to move. His voice trembled as he spoke, attempting in vain to argue his case.

“Yoongi told me when we married that...you’d been considering taking a concubine. That I should be careful because of that. So all this time, I believed...” Seokjin didn’t dare finish.

How did one say, ‘I believed everyone else except you’?

“Yes,” Namjoon nodded. “I told Yoongi I wanted to take a concubine, but the only one I ever thought of was the kitchen servant Jin. All this time, there’s been no one else but you.”

When Seokjin moved, it was to place his hands on Namjoon’s own, which remained locked around his midsection. He had to pinch himself, just to see if he was dreaming, because surely that’s what this was, right?

Namjoon burrowed his face in Seokjin’s neck, pressing a kiss to the rough skin around his bitemark. “I don’t care about children. How could I? All that matters is you.”

Seokjin laughed, but it sounded hollow even to his ears. He swallowed the lump in his throat. For some reason, he felt as if he had to be honest with Namjoon, as if he had to come clean about what he had hidden from his mate. “Good,” he muttered, voice wobbly. “Because in that regard, I have already failed you thrice.”

Namjoon’s arms squeezed tighter, his hand running across Seokjin’s flat stomach, as if searching for something. “You’re saying...”

“I lost three of them, and I hid it from you every time,” Seokjin admitted quietly. “I did not want to disappoint you. I did not want you to have a reason to get rid of me.”

Namjoon chuckled lowly, the sound vibrating against the back of Seokjin’s neck. “Oh, Jin. If anything, I fear *you* will want to be rid of *me*.”

Seokjin shook his head furiously. “Never!” he insisted. “You are...the only one for me. I’m sorry I doubted you, that I thought the worst. I only - “

Namjoon gently grabbed Seokjin by the shoulders and turned him so they were facing each other. The alpha’s eyes were red-rimmed and swollen, a mirror of Seokjin’s.

“There’s nothing to forgive. You are so very strong, Jin, and yet I know how much you doubt yourself. You let the demons in your head persuade you otherwise and I...I did not treat you as I should have once we married. I’m the one who should be sorry.”

Seokjin shook his head. “No more apologies. From either of us. I just want us to be together, to trust one another. Is that too much to ask?”

Namjoon pressed a kiss to the omega’s forehead, then to each of his cheeks. “It’s not too much to ask at all.”

He intertwined their fingers, holding hands with great care. “No matter what doubts come our way, I want us to both remain sure of one thing. Our love.”

Seokjin blinked away the tears in his eyes. “Of course,” he insisted.

He pressed his forehead against Namjoon’s and allowed himself this moment, this special moment in time that just the two of them, together again.

From now on, I will treat your words with more weight than anyone else’s. I swear it. I won’t turn away from you ever again.

Seokjin made this solemn promise to himself and forgot all about the vows he’d made before it.

In the silence of the night, as the king and his consort reconciled, a beast awoke from its slumber.

The demon saw this and sighed.

Chapter End Notes

TO EXPLAIN WHY Lady Hae WAS WORRIED: Min Duran and Woo Hyewon are not guilty for causing the Uprising. They are merely pawns of a much larger scheme in her eyes, and so they are innocent. Lady Hae does not believe that they deserve being

stripped of their fertility for good just because they might mate Namjoon. She is also afraid that by doing this, Seokjin will be damning himself to forever remain childless. She is a very superstitious lady and believes in karma and the gods and all that. (since people don't seem to like her i just felt like i had to justify her words and thoughts lol)

BUT ANYWAYS!!!! SORRY IT TOOK SO LONG TO UPDATE!! also sorry this chapter was so short. i finally had some time to write it, but i felt like this chapter should sort of stand on its own, as it's been a long time coming???

the ending might have some cheesy moments, but i feel like seokjin and namjoon deserve it after all they've been through, and the one final trial they will have to go through together!! hehe :> within the next two chapters there will be mpreg so be prepared for that.

NEXT UPDATE IS SCHEDULED FOR NEXT FRIDAY. I need some accountability in order to update so there we go lol

as always follow me on twitter or message me on curiouscat!! love you all!! thank you for all the kudos, comments, and bookmarks :)

Calm, Then Storm

Chapter Summary

Namjoon and Seokjin share a few moments speaking of the past. The scales fall from Yoongi's eyes.

Chapter Notes

tw: description of a (mutilated) corpse

sorry this is late!! i will try to do better T T

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“You’ll like this tea, I think,” Lady Hae offered. “It’s been imported from Qing. Very pricey, I must say! I think they’ve risen tariffs again.”

Seokjin smiled at her pleasantly, inclining his head, and Jimin took the tea from Lady Hae’s maidservant.

“Yes, things have been a little tense with Qing as of late,” Seokjin admitted. “No merchant wants to make the journey back and forth across the border, what will all the raids that have been going on. Because of that, trade’s been rather stagnant.”

“Lady Jeon insists that the Qing soldiers at the border have just been getting into tiffs with the nearby villages for fun! Ha! What sort of fun is it to kill people?” Lady Hae fanned herself, miffed.

Seokjin only continued to smile. “I wouldn’t know.”

“Lady Jeon doesn’t necessarily know what she’s talking about,” Jimin interjected, narrowing his eyes. “Jeongguk told me that it’s a little more serious than a few raids. It’s not villages that they’re fighting anymore, but our own soldiers. The king and the ministers agreed to send a small party to try and negotiate or find out what was going on, but there’s been no word since. That was a month ago.”

“I doubt that Chanyeol is behind all of this. I think one of his wayward brothers or cousins might be the culprit here,” Seokjin theorized. He knew that war was probably the last thing on Chanyeol’s mind, especially war with Seokjin’s own kingdom, who’d been a close ally for centuries.

Lady Hae frowned and opened her mouth, about to say something else, but was interrupted by the sound of footsteps tapping against marble floors. She turned her head and in the next second, immediately dropped to the ground in a curtsy.

“Your Highness,” she greeted formally. Her maidservant echoed both her movement and words.

Jimin bowed low and even when he came back up, he kept his head and gaze lowered. Seokjin

turned slightly, and he could unfortunately just feel his own eyes lit up. He tried in vain to calm the frantic beating of his heart and said in a voice that was too soft for his own liking, "Hello, Joon."

"Seokjin," Namjoon said, smiling as he reached out his hand. "Come with me. There's something I want to show you!"

The royal consort bid his friends goodbye, instructing Jimin to have a pot of Lady Hae's new tea ready for him when he got back, and took Namjoon's hand. He followed along down the hallway and quickly realized that Namjoon was taking him into the library.

Seokjin inched closer, sticking himself flush against Namjoon's side as he hugged the alpha's arm. "I have to wonder what sort of thing you want to show me in here," he murmured, rubbing his cheek against Namjoon's shoulder.

He craved the sort of close contact that he had denied himself of for so long after their mating, and Namjoon was eager to oblige his omega's demands.

"I've had something prepared for us, and no," Namjoon's cheeks flushed. "It's nothing scandalous. I know what you're thinking."

"Hmm," Seokjin sighed dramatically, fluttering his eyelashes. "What a pity!"

Namjoon wrapped an arm around Seokjin's waist as he pushed open the door to the library. "I think you'll still enjoy it."

After passing several shelves and taking a right and then a left, they found themselves at the center of the maze of shelves, and inside that empty center was a table today. Two chairs sat on either side, and on top of the table was a black and white board, covered in similarly colored pieces.

"You told me that it's been a while since you'd played chess," Namjoon reasoned. "I was hoping we could play a round or two today while we were both free."

Seokjin smiled softly, a little surprised that Namjoon had remembered something so small he mentioned only once. The omega approached the table and took a seat. He picked up one of the small white pieces and examined it.

"Only because I haven't had a set or even a partner to play with," Seokjin admitted. "I would have taught Jimin or even Lady Hae if I had the right pieces. I certainly would have had enough time for _"

He paused for a moment, examining the piece in his hand carefully. There was a chip on the bottom of it, and he turned it over to find a familiar engraving there. "It's my name," Seokjin blinked. "But in Western letters. One of the foreign diplomats who visited years and years ago had had it made for me. But how..."

"It's yours," Namjoon informed. "The very same one. Whenever the Uprising happened, I had your room searched and one of my guards brought this back to me. I'd kept it for a while, unsure of what to do with it. Then when everything happened, I...well, I wasn't sure how to give it back."

Something in Seokjin's heart ached, and he didn't know what to say in response to Namjoon's confession. Looking at the chess set before him, he felt an unmistakable sense of nostalgia wash over him. His hand trembled, and for a moment he felt as if he were nine years old again, learning how to play this game for the very first time.

"Thank you," Seokjin finally decided on saying, though he knew it wasn't enough. He set the

white piece down and gestured for Namjoon to sit down. “Just don’t get too upset when I crush you.”

Namjoon smirked. “I should say the same to you.”

After the sixth and final round, in which Namjoon won and tied the score, Seokjin had to concede that Namjoon was much better than he’d expected.

“I suppose your studies overseas are what helped you get so good at this game? You must have played against some of the best and brightest minds over there,” Seokjin sighed, slumping in his seat.

He couldn’t help but pout a little. He was used to always winning.

“I suppose you can say that,” Namjoon shrugged his shoulders. He reached over and threaded his fingers through Seokjin’s own, then brought the omega’s hand up for a kiss. “But I have to say you’re my most challenging opponent.”

Seokjin laughed, shaking his head. “Oh, please!”

“You are! You are!” Namjoon insisted. “We think a lot alike, so it’s hard to think of a strategy you won’t already know about.”

Seokjin merely shook his head once more, but the smile did not leave his face. Until he felt a sense of unease rippling through himself, something foreign that had no business being there. Seokjin could tell this feeling was not his own.

“You’re...worried about something,” the omega surmised. “What is it?”

For a moment, Namjoon was silent. “There’s something else I want to return to you. I just...I hope you don’t think it’s weird.”

Seokjin raised an eyebrow.

The hand which held Seokjin’s tightened slightly, while the other hand reached into Namjoon’s coat pocket and pulled out something ivory and trimmed with lace. It was another long-forgotten memento, an item which Seokjin had thought was gone for good, ransacked by rebels or perhaps thrown in some pile to burn after the Uprising.

This particular memento was different, as it held a certain sort of significance not only to Seokjin, but to Namjoon as well.

It was the engagement collar that Namjoon gave to Seokjin.

The very first one, that is.

“It’s been so long,” Seokjin’s voice cracked against his wishes. He let go of Namjoon’s hand so he could expect the necklace more carefully.

The thing was as soft as ever, and it carried a certain weight to it, years of memories wrapped inside. Seokjin felt his eyes burn as his stomach twisted, and his own sadness crept over him silently. Without his permission, a few tears leaked out.

“I’m sorry,” Seokjin apologized immediately, rubbing at his eyes. “I don’t even know why I’m crying!”

“It’s alright,” Namjoon soothed him. He came over and rubbed Seokjin’s shoulders carefully as the omega sniffled and tried to quickly compose himself. “You’re allowed to feel things, Seokjin.”

After the tears on Seokjin’s cheeks dried, the omega gave one last sniff. He turned his face up to look at Namjoon.

“There’s something I’ve wanted to ask you for a while now,” Seokjin’s fingers tightened around the collar in his hands. “You don’t have to answer if you don’t want to. But...how did you survive the fire? I...I was sure you had died.”

Namjoon’s face turned grave. “I did die,” he admitted, as though it were the simplest thing in the world. “I died, and I came back. The fact that I’m alive, that I’m sane and safe, here with you right now - it’s all because of magic.”

“Magic? Whose magic?” Seokjin asked, though he felt an awful feeling in his gut.

He could count on one hand the number of witches he knew. He hoped it might be Jessi. Jessi was safe, wasn’t she? Yet there was no way. Jessi was only a little older than them. She’d have to have been a teen when the fire happened.

“A witch,” Namjoon said, smiling. “Her name was Eunha. After Lord Woo pulled me from the fire, she healed me. I asked her why, and she said it was because my time wasn’t over yet. There was an important role I had to play in the game that was to come, and I couldn’t die just yet. She said the gods had willed it so.”

“The gods,” Seokjin repeated, the words tasting foul in his mouth.

His back began to itch, and he tried his absolute best to make sure that none of his discomfort or apprehension leaked out towards Namjoon. He did not want his mate to think he found his resurrection to be a bad omen, when it couldn’t be further from the truth. If anything, Seokjin loathed the worrisome nature of his resurrection and not the revival itself.

But he didn’t know too much about magic. Perhaps there was nothing wrong with what happened. Seokjin ignored the voice inside of him which shouted that something was terribly wrong, that Namjoon was in danger, and the phoenix inside of him began to screech something fierce, wanting nothing more than to be let out. Only time could grant that wish, though, and the preparations for such a thing had not been completed.

“It’s a miracle then,” Seokjin placed a hand to Namjoon’s cheek, gazing at him fondly, “that you are here with me today.”

“It’s a miracle that *you’re* here,” Namjoon countered, wrapping his arms around Seokjin’s waist. “If you had been killed during the Uprising, or if we had never even met...Gods, I don’t want to think of my life without you in it. I don’t think I can picture such a thing.”

Seokjin laughed and leaned into his mate’s embrace. “Good!” he said gleefully, pressing his nose into the rough skin beside Namjoon’s scent glands. “Because I’m afraid you’re stuck with me for the rest of it!”

He glanced at Namjoon’s glands, and his fingers ran across the phoenix on the other side of Namjoon’s neck, eliciting a shiver from the alpha. He continued to stare at the glands and could not help but to think, *Tomorrow, I will ask him. Tomorrow, I will find out if he will wear a mark like mine or not.*

“How did this happen?” Yoongi asked sharply.

The servants responsible for guarding the cell quivered. “He was fine last night! We gave him dinner and he ate all of it. Nothing seemed amiss! We received word of your visit but we didn’t tell him, just as you asked! Please, my lord! Have mercy.”

Yoongi picked up his skirts and wrinkled his nose at the red-brown stain along the hem of the material.

“Who discovered him?”

One servant stepped forward and prostrated themselves on the floor. “I...I heard him cry for help and so I came to see what was the matter, but by the time I got here...he was already gone.”

Yoongi sighed. No witnesses, then. He took a step forward, careful of where he planted his feet and entered the jail cell.

His uncle’s eyes were wide open, glassy and unseeing, while his mouth looked as though it had been wrenched open, a bloody, gaping hole. Yoongi’s guts churned and he felt nauseous as he got a whiff of the smell.

He staggered, hand rising to his mouth, and could not control himself as he leaned over to vomit.

“Lord Min!” the servants cried, hurrying over to fuss over him, but Yoongi waved them away, regaining his composure.

Yoongi forced his feet to move and ever so carefully leaned down. He placed a trembling hand around his uncle’s jaws and peered inside his mouth. He could only look for a moment, the nausea too strong. His uncle’s mouth reeked of malicious energy, a force darker than anything Yoongi had ever encountered before.

Yoongi stood with help from a servant and averted his gaze from the ghastly sight. “His tongue has been ripped out. Someone knew I wanted to speak to him today. This is a punishment for him and a warning for me.”

He wiped his bloodstained fingers with a handkerchief that was offered to him.

One of the servants wrung their hands. “My lord, what would you like us to do with the body?”

Yoongi threw them a sharp look, “Prepare him for burial, of course! He is a Min so he shall be buried in the family crypt. Let no one say that Min Yoongi is unfilial.”

He left the cell and the flustered servants behind him, but the image of his uncle remained ever present in his mind. He did not feel triumphant or even grieved at the loss of the man. He felt nothing at all.

Yoongi had wanted to ask him about his mother, about just what it was his father and Uncle had done when they took Yoongi from her side, but it seemed as though someone did not want him to discover it. The most likely culprit was his very own mother, of course, and it confirmed some of Yoongi’s worst fears.

Once his mother left him, she had changed. They’d reunited briefly when Yoongi’s father died and yet he had not realized the coldness of her touch could be found in her heart as well. She had not merely changed. She had went through a metamorphosis, becoming something else entirely.

Yoongi took slow, patient steps to his father's office. Though it was no longer his father's - it was his now. It had been Yoongi's for years now, and yet he had only entered it a total of five times.

In his absence these last few months, the servants had neglected it. Yoongi wrinkled his nose at the fine layer of dust that coated the surface of one of his bookshelves, rolling his fingers together. He'd have to deduct a few salaries before he left for the palace again.

It was hard to manage an estate when one was not actually living at the estate. Worse still was when one had a younger cousin who liked to visit and undermine their authority.

Yoongi ran a hand across the desk as he delicately sat down, looking upon his office and imagining his father sitting here. In his memories, the man was stern and unmoving, but always kind when it came to Yoongi himself. His father hired the best tutors and even sat in on a few of the lessons, correcting Yoongi here and there. He loved his son in the only way he knew how.

The physical contact between them was scarce, perhaps a pat on the head every now and then, but it was enough. Yoongi knew his father did not want him to become too soft. He was already determined to be an omega. Any softer and he would be weak.

Yoongi closed his eyes and tried to remember how his father had died, yet a chill came over him as he realized he could not.

My uncle killed my father, Yoongi told himself. *That is all I have ever known. But how did he do it?*

He had never needed to ask. It hadn't mattered how it had happened. What mattered was the fact that it *had*. Dead was dead, and nothing would bring his father back.

Yoongi called for a servant to begin grinding ink for him, and then he began a letter. He would not bother his mother any longer, aware of the fact that she would refuse to answer, and so he wrote this letter to another woman he knew.

Park Yerin.

The madame of the gisaeng house had claimed to know his mother. Surely, she would know the details of what had happened to what was once the great White Witch, destined to save all magic.

"Sara," Yoongi began.

The servant stopped grinding ink for a moment, inclining her head. "Yes, my lord?"

"How did my father die?"

Sara blinked and her brow furrowed in confusion. She looked a little hesitant, as if afraid this were some sort of test. "Your uncle killed him?"

"Yes," Yoongi said patiently. "But *how*?"

Sara paled. "Surely you jest, my lord! Such a thing...it was so horrible, how could I dare repeat it?"

"Tell me," Yoongi commanded sharply.

The older woman flinched, but ultimately relented. "It was...very dishonorable. The late Lord Min had his hands cut off and he was castrated. And his eyes...."

Pinpricks poked at the back of Yoongi's own eyelids. "What happened to his eyes?" he demanded.

Sara looked away nervously and said in a very low voice. "They were gouged out."

Yoongi slumped in his chair, leaning his head back. He dared not close his eyes, afraid of the images that might come to mind.

Of course. How could he have forgotten? How could he have ignored that scene?

And yet he could not help but think, why would his uncle commit such a gruesome murder?

Surely it was wasteful, surely it was dangerous, to cut off parts of a person instead of just poisoning them or slitting their throat.

What sort of grudge was so great that torture was the only answer?

His uncle had always wanted the Min estate to be his, but he could have gotten rid of his brother in a much cleaner, less traceable way.

So why would he kill in such a way?

Unless he hadn't.

The brush plopped onto the desk, splattering ink onto what Yoongi had written. His eyes burned and he clutched at them, letting out a hoarse, ugly scream.

"Hush, my child," she'd crooned, her cheeks and hands painted red. She reached out the palm of one hand and covered his eyes. "I'll make it so you can't remember or see. Such things are better off forgotten."

These eyes of his which had been a treasure, laced with silver lacquer and all-seeing.

He'd been able to see it all. The screams echoed in his ears as his father reached out a hand for help, only to have his mother cut it off with a flick of her wrist. A phantom premonition of what went on behind closed doors. The powers which his mother had once praised were now a thorn in her side and so as she placed her bloody hand across his eyes, she sealed whatever divination ability Yoongi had.

She'd purged him of the memories, but recently, things had been bleeding through into the present. Her illusions had faltered, and with one word from a lowly servant, they shattered entirely.

Yoongi knew the truth now.

He felt as though his eyes were still on fire and he reached out for something to steady himself. He clenched the letter in his hand tightly, crumbling it into nothing.

"My lord!" Sara called frantically, ducking her head to miss the ink that Yoongi shoved off the desk.

A servant knocked at the door with three frantic taps, but the next second they forgot all propriety and barged inside.

"Lord Min!" they called, sounding and looking rather sick. "It's an emergency! There's been word from the capital!"

He opened his eyes and yet at once, the omega knew that something was wrong. Red ran down on his face, the imitation of tears, and he took the letter that was handed to him with trembling hands. For some reason he felt as though he knew what sort of news this single piece of paper would

bring.

It was simple and brief, one line written out clearly in Kim Namjoon's own handwriting.

The Qing Empire has declared war.

Chapter End Notes

hiiii to anyone who is still reading this story!! i feel like quite a few people have dropped this story which is understandable considering how long it takes me to update lol OTL ,,.,but thank you to everyone who hasn't!! i will honestly try to get better about updates.

another note about updates: they will be much shorter in the future as we approach the end (probably)! basically just don't expect 7k chapters a lot anymore. i've found that these last few chapters have been hard to meet the word count that i normally set for myself which is discouraging :/ so i've just decided that i won't worry about that anymore!! also maybe if i focus less on word count, then i can get more chapters out and finish this story for you guys!!

i am sooo sorry for taking so long to complete this story, and I have to say that it's really amazing that so many of you have stuck with me, especially with my crappy update schedule!! i love you all so much!! <3 thank you for reading and see you (hopefully) soon!

you know what to do [twitter](#) and [curiouscat](#)

- seleneilene xoxo

The Beginning of the End

Chapter Summary

Seokjin hides some things from Namjoon, who goes off to fight in the war.

Chapter Notes

ahhhh what can i say...i have not gotten any better at updates...honestly it is a miracle this chapter got out at all! if you follow me on twitter, you've probably noticed a shift in the content that i retweet and consume. my twitter really just became a MDZS/SV/TGCF main and BTS side lol with that being said, I am and always will be an ARMY!! it's just that with BTS being on a break, I've found other fandoms to invest myself in.

i will admit that with the stress of college work and sorority, i considered just dropping Rising Sun altogether. BUT that would be too easy. I slowly started to lose my passion for this fic, but I really do want to see it completed. It's been my baby for almost two years. I feel like I owe it to not only you guys but also myself to finish!!

My main goal is to have this story finished before its two year anniversary at the end of the year!! I will do my absolute best to make sure that happens!! I mean, five chapters? I can definitely do that!! (i hope :<)

thank you to everyone for being so patient!! <3 I love you all, each and every one!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Seokjin did not speak of it to anyone after the first few months he found out. A part of him felt as if speaking the words would trigger the blood to drip down his thighs, his womb crushing the fragile life it carried inside. If he even acknowledged it to be true, he would jinx himself.

Jessi seemed to understand his hesitation. Though she'd been coming in and out of the palace, keeping track of his cycles and failures, she did not say a single word as she took his pulse. The beta merely raised her eyebrows upon taking his pulse and let slip a small smile.

"Namjoon will need to know," Jessi said, letting go of Seokjin's wrist. "You are passed the first trimester. This one will be successful. The curse has been dispersed - there's not a single trace left."

"You never told me who it was that had it cast," Seokjin probed.

Jessi looked unsettled. "I could not tell for sure, but...it looked like it was set in place a long time ago. Gods, you would have been what? Four?"

Seokjin closed his eyes and remembered the woman with wild, silver eyes that his father had kept locked up. She'd reached out a hand, begging for help and -

Seokjin opened his eyes. He could not remember any more.

“I do not know her name, but it was a woman. A witch with silver eyes,” he told Jessi. For some reason, he knew this to be true, just as he would know the twitch or ache of one of his own limbs.

A mask fell over Jessi’s face. “How odd,” she remarked, voice void of emotion.

She packed up her little instruments, musing as she did so. “I’m sure Namjoon will be overjoyed. Well, everyone will be! It’s the right time. We could all use some good news amidst all the bad.”

Seokjin’s lips twisted into a frown. He rested a hand on his stomach, gently rubbing to try and see if he could notice a bump yet or not.

“It would be nice, wouldn’t it?” Seokjin agreed. He had no plans for any announcement. He did not even know how he would tell Namjoon.

“You’ll let me tell him, won’t you?” Seokjin wanted to make sure. He made himself smile, appearing as serene and joyful as any expecting omega might be at the thought of telling their mate they were pregnant.

“Of course!” Jessi assured him. “It would be best if it came from you, I think.”

Seokjin inclined his head. “Thank you for everything, Jessi. I owe you much for this favor.”

Jessi waved her hand. “It was nothing. Namjoon has always been a friend of mine. So has Yerin. Besides, it was the right thing to do. That child...”

She trailed off for a moment. “It’s hard to explain, but I get the sense that that child must be born. It’s destiny, if you will.”

Seokjin couldn’t help but chuckle a little. “I don’t know anything about destiny, but thank you. If there’s any problems-”

“Then I will see fit to slit my throat,” Jessi declared, still smiling.

Seokjin did not know if she was joking.

“I’ll come back for a check up in a few months,” the witch told him, bowing before she took her leave.

Once she left, Ru entered the room. Her and Jimin had both been guarding the entrance. It was Jimin’s duty to discreetly help Jessi leave, so he would be back later.

“What did she say?” Ru asked, wringing her hands. “It was good news, right?”

“In a way,” Seokjin admitted. He couldn’t stop himself from grinning. “I am expecting.”

Ru let out a shriek and flung herself over, grasping her hands in his own. “Oh, Gods! This is wonderful. Congratulations, Seokjin! I’m so happy for you!”

“I want to keep things quiet, though,” he told her, smile falling from his face. “The less people that know, the better.”

“Of course,” Ru nodded her head firmly. “I’m sure that awful Woo girl or even Min Duran would pull something if they knew. Ah, I can’t believe it! This is such great news! And at a time like this! Oh, my...it’s almost something like out of a story, isn’t it?”

Seokjin raised an eyebrow.

Ru continued on. "You know...the alpha and omega fall in love. The alpha finds out his lover is expecting, but he has to go off to war, and leave his pregnant omega behind! That kind of story."

A shadow fell over Seokjin's face.

Right. *War*.

Namjoon was set to leave in only a few days, off to fight the Qing soldiers. Seokjin had written letter after letter to Chanyeol, desperately trying to find a sense of clarity within the whole mess, yet each one went unanswered. Namjoon would have to go off to fight, and there was nothing Seokjin could do about it.

Ru wilted like a flower. "Oh, Jin. I'm sorry...I didn't even think! But, but you know! In those stories, the alpha always comes back."

But life is not a story, Ru, Seokjin thought. *Something you know all too well.*

There was a war that raged beyond the palace walls, and yet another waging inside of Seokjin himself. He felt helpless and lost at the thought of being left behind, however a small part of him roared back to life, triumphant that so many of the Bangtan forces might be losing their lives.

They killed *my* people. They took *my* crown.

But when he thought of Namjoon's smiling face, his warm hands wrapped around his hips, the soothing smell of charcoal - the vengeance that rose so quickly fell just the same.

Seokjin cursed his very own nature, this soft and weak part of him which forgave and forgot all too soon. *If I were not an omega*, he thought. *Perhaps I would have been able to kill Namjoon.*

Seokjin spent his nights in Namjoon's chamber now, tucked in against the alpha's side. The night before Namjoon was to leave, Seokjin remained silent as he came to bed, frazzled by his nerves.

"You've been far too quiet tonight," Namjoon murmured, shrugging on his inner robes for the night and tying them closed. He sat by Seokjin on the bed. "You hardly even ate your food during dinner, and you *love* steak. What's the matter?"

Seokjin flushed at the tingling he felt as Namjoon wrapped an arm around his waist. Though their intimacy had become the norm these past few months, Seokjin was still adjusting to it. It was still strange and foreign to him, who had gone so long starved for touch.

The omega cleared his throat. "I'm...just worried, that's all. This whole war with Qing was so sudden, I...well, I can hardly wrap my head around it."

Namjoon frowned. "Yes, Chanyeol hadn't seemed the type to be this reckless."

Seokjin turned into Namjoon's side, burrowing into his warm embrace. He reached a hand up to play with the rough scars on Namjoon's neck, next to his glands.

"You will be coming back," he stated, not a hope or a prayer, but a fact. "Safe and sound and whole. You will come back to me, or else I will follow."

Namjoon stiffened. When he spoke his voice was strained. "Then I suppose I have no choice."

He grabbed one of Seokjin's hands and pressed a gentle kiss to it. "I'll be coming back no matter what."

Seokjin leaned his head against Namjoon's shoulders. He felt the words grow like flowers in his throat, and the idea stuck there, too beautiful and large for him to actually say it out loud.

We're going to have a child, he wanted to say. I'm finally going to prove useful. I'll be giving you an heir.

I don't want you to leave. I don't want you to die. You must stay here with me, so that doesn't happen.

I love you, but a part of me still wants to kill you. Tell me, how can I kill my own heart?

Seokjin did not say any of these things, though he would regret it in the months that followed. Instead he gathered his courage and pressed a lingering kiss to Namjoon's neck.

"Will you wear my mark, Namjoon?" he whispered.

Namjoon turned his head so fast he nearly collided with Seokjin, who leaned away just in time to avoid it. At Seokjin's wide-eyed, timid look, the fierce expression on his face softened, though his eyes remained dark.

"You want to mark me," he said, in awe and disbelief.

Seokjin puffed out his cheeks, crossing his arms over his chest. "You are mine. It's only right that other people see that!"

He looked away, unable to meet Namjoon's eyes. For a few tense moments, there was nothing but silence. Seokjin's heart constricted painfully.

"If you don't want it, then - "

Namjoon reached out to tilt his head up by the tip of his chin.

He kissed him, rough and passionate, as if that single kiss contained all the feelings and words he himself could not say. They broke apart, both gasping for air.

"There is nothing I wish for more," Namjoon growled, voice husky and filled with promise.

Seokjin's cheeks flushed, and he felt light and warm all over.

"Let me do it while you're inside me," he wrapped his arms around Namjoon's neck. "Think of how good it will feel then!"

As they tumbled into bed together, Seokjin did just that. With Namjoon rocking inside of him, he pressed his face up close to the alpha's scarred neck and dug his teeth into the tough scent gland there.

Warm, bitter blood rushed into Seokjin's mouth, and it suddenly felt as if the world clicked into place. He could feel Namjoon, not just physically, but...but he could sense him, as if he was there inside of his very own heart, the alpha's feelings and emotions of such pure love nestled deep next to Seokjin's own. He was crying before he knew it, the wet tears running down his face. Seokjin let go of the hold he had on Namjoon's neck, withdrawing his teeth carefully as he let out a sob.

Was it really ok? Was it ok for him to feel this happiness, this love?

Namjoon shushed him gently, kissing away his tears. "Are you ok?"

"Yes," Seokjin sniffled. "I just didn't know it would feel like this. Namjoon, I -"

"It's fine. You don't need to say anymore. I understand," Namjoon told him, eyes warm. He pressed his forehead against Seokjin's. "No mere words can convey this sort of feeling."

As they lay together that night, Namjoon's hand rested heavy against Seokjin's bare stomach.

For a brief moment, Seokjin thought that Namjoon's departure came with a small blessing. He would not have to take pains to hide the swelling of his stomach from his attentive lover, since said lover would no longer be sharing his bed. Though he would ache for Namjoon, this was for the best.

Seokjin could not bear to disappoint Namjoon with more of his shortcomings. If this child was truly meant to be born as Jessi said it was, then Namjoon would not know of him until he was delivered safe and sound, cooing happily in Namjoon's very own arms.

He reminded himself of this as he kissed Namjoon goodbye the next day, taking pride in the fierce bite mark that decorated his neck. Now was not the time for such revelations anyways.

Even though it hurt his heart more and more the further Namjoon rode away from him, Seokjin comforted himself with the knowledge that he could feel him and their bond, which was stronger than it had ever been before. As long as they had it, Seokjin would know if Namjoon was safe.

Namjoon and his men came across slaughtered villages and rotting fields of dead soldiers, yet not once in the five months that followed did they see a single live Qing soldier. The few they did stumble upon were closest to the border, and they'd been dead for weeks, known only by the tattered clothes on their backs.

Namjoon felt his neck itch, the new wound stinging. He scratched at it every now and then,

It was night when she came.

Her presence was eerie enough for the guard on watch to signal the alarm, and Namjoon arose from his tent, in full uniform to greet the threat as his men formed lines and lines behind him.

She approached by herself, a striking figure in white robes. Her long black hair was a tangled mess as it flew in front of her face, hiding her features.

Yet Namjoon would have known her from a mile away. She had come down and saved him once, but now....now it seemed like instead of his savior, she would play the role of executioner. A single woman against thousands of men. Namjoon could not say who would win.

"Eunha!" Namjoon greeted sharply. "What's the meaning of this? Why are you here?"

She had never shown herself to such a large group of people before. Namjoon became nervous at the implication.

A ghastly grin spread across Eunha's blood-stained lips, and she laughed. "Why, I'm here to eat, of course."

Namjoon's stomach dropped. "These are my men, Eunha. What are you talking about?"

She tilted her head back. "It wasn't enough," she remarked. "Those lives during the Uprising...they

only made the hunger worse.”

Something in Namjoon told him he needed to run, but he could not move his feet even if he tried. He drew his sword, but his fingers trembled against the cool metal.

“No...don’t tell me,” he did not want to confirm what he knew to be true.

He thought of the slaughtered villages he’d seen, on the way to the border. The bodies had been ripped apart and gnawed on by wild animals...or so they thought.

Eunha’s source of power was a dark thing. She’d revealed the truth of it as she bandaged Namjoon’s burns and cuts. All of her abilities had been sucked away by the king when he imprisoned her, so Eunha could no longer produce magic energy herself. She had to take the energy of others in order to perform her miracles.

With a chuckle, she’d admitted that it took the total of a dying coven’s might to bring Namjoon back to life. She’d hunted down each and every witch from her past and eaten them alive.

“Those villages...it was you. Not the Qing soldiers,” Namjoon realized, horrified.

Eunha scoffed, eyes narrowing. “Oh, please. Don’t tell me you didn’t see this coming? Peacetime is just too peaceful. Hardly anyone ever dies, and when they do, they’re too sick for me to find any joy in eating them. That or they’re so weak they give me little nourishment.”

“You will stop this,” Namjoon commanded. His neck burned, and he almost thought he heard a phoenix screech. “You are killing innocent people this time, not the old king’s minions. What made you think this was ok?”

“Kim Namjoon, you’re rather foolish,” the former White Witch snapped back. She placed a hand to her chest. “What citizen of this country is truly innocent, after how much they made me suffer? No one, not a single person came to my aid. For that, they deserve to die.”

This was not the woman he had once known. Not anymore. How blinded was she by her hatred, by her need for revenge?

“You’ve changed,” Namjoon shook his head, taking a step back. “You’ve warped entirely. I won’t let you continue this.”

“Let me?” Eunha scoffed. “I don’t think you really get a say in this.” She came closer and pressed a cold hand on top of Namjoon’s head.

“Remember Namjoon,” she whispered, face distorted into something ugly and monstrous. “I am the master. You are the puppet.”

Namjoon pushed her away angrily. “You’re no master of mine!”

Eunha smiled serenely. “Perhaps not yet.”

The former White Witch spread her arms out to the side, palms spread up, and her eyes smiled like two crescent moons. “The life I gave you,” she declared. “I’ll be taking it back today.”

A sort of dark energy started to gather in her palms, swirling and twirling into a great mass of black ink. Namjoon felt his heart still in his chest, and his grip loosened around his sword. He could not even raise the weapon to try and fight this creature before him. The alpha was frozen by fear and something else he could not describe, a sort of calm acceptance that he knew all too well.

Just as the flames had seared the last of his skin off, he'd closed his melting eyes and sunk into a cold, dark ocean. He felt that now, closing in around him. His breath stuttered. As the energy in Eunha's hand grew, Namjoon felt something sucked out of him, unable to even breathe.

Ah, he thought. I should be grateful. I lived longer than I should have. I suppose asking for any more is...too much.

He remembered the lie he had told to Seokjin. *No matter what*, he had said. He did not care about himself, but hearing Seokjin speak that way...

He did not underestimate his mate, nor take his words for anything other than the solemn vow they were.

Seokjin must not follow him. Namjoon squeezed his eyes shut. He could not ever follow. With a simple stroke of ink and the king's royal seal, Namjoon had made sure of it. Seokjin would live the life he was meant to live before the Bangtan forces had come and snatched it all away.

Namjoon felt his sword fall from his hands and he swayed. He heard someone calling his name. Hoseok. It was Hoseok. He turned his head to see the general charging forward, arm stretched forward as if to somehow reach him but-

He would not make it.

Namjoon tried to reassure his friend with a smile, eyelids fluttering.

It's fine, Hoseok, he wanted to say.

Take care of things for me, yeah?

Yet he could not say a single one of these things as the gleaming red and gold on his neck began to peel and fly away like ash, and the phantom imprints of Seokjin's teeth pulsed, attempting to dig at him, to tether him somehow to this world.

He was destined to fail.

The entire palace could hear the royal consort's screams. The sound bounced across the marble floors and pillars, striking through the paper screens and doors. It was a constant ringing, one that became deeper and more distressed, mixed in with tears and sobs, yet not once throughout the whole entire night did it ever stop.

Prince Consort Seokjin continued to scream and cry, yell and curse until his voice turned hoarse and nothing he said made sense any longer. The palace did not know rest while Seokjin labored through the night.

Only when dawn broke did the consort's screams finally begin to die off. The whole palace let out a collective sigh of relief at the brief moment of silence, but they had been too hasty in believing the whirlstorm of noise was over.

Though Royal Consort Seokjin had finally cried himself to sleep, it was Crown Prince Yeonjun who took over his bearer's watch. His tiny, premature lungs held a tremendous strength.

Instead of joyous bells, what greeted the newborn prince was the solemn beating of drums, signalling King Namjoon's death.

Chapter End Notes

ARC III: CONSORT - END

ARC IV: KING - Chapters 31-35



hehehe...pls don't kill me...I PROMISED A HAPPY ENDING OK!!!

King Seokjin

Chapter Summary

Namjoon's will is read, and Yoongi tells Seokjin a story.

Chapter Notes

ahahahaha guys don't worry, trust me when i say HAPPY ENDING, ok???? love you all xoxo

TW: allusions/attempt to kill a bird (bird is not really murdered, jin just thinks about doing it)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

For seven days and seven nights, Seokjin slept. He dreamed. He dreamed of many things, as frightening and foreign as they usually were.

He dreamed of a world in which his mother ruled as queen, a beta consort by her side and their alpha son the heir to the throne. In this world, Seokjin was a shadow, a scar and reminder of how close she came to losing it all.

He dreamed of another world in which Taehyung had killed their father, sticking a silver sword into his gut.

He dreamed of the witch yet again. Her stubby fingers reached out towards him, silver eyes glinting with terror and fear and desperation towards Seokjin who was her only hope. He turned his back from her and ran. Perhaps that's why she had reached a hand inside his belly and planted something evil there, that which was meant to end the Kim line.

He dreamed he was being ripped open, his own child an ugly monster with talons for fingers and beady black eyes.

However the most terrifying dream was what he woke up to.

Reality. A world without Namjoon.

On the eighth day, Seokjin finally woke and entered hell. He felt an acute sense of loss, a ringing, hollow emptiness that stemmed from the fading mark on his neck. Before Jimin could stop him, he'd begun to claw at his face, letting out a gut-wrenching scream. He felt as he did when he'd been stripped of his crown, when he'd learned of Namjoon's identity and resolved to kill him. But this was so much worse. Namjoon was truly gone now, and there was nothing he could do to stop it.

Namjoon, he cried pitifully in his heart. Where have you gone? Why aren't you here? You promised you wouldn't leave me.

Seokjin threw whatever he could get his hands on. He raged and he screamed, barely pausing to take a breath. His friends could not get a word in edge-wise. Flinching at the sounds that followed his tantrum, they tried to placate him with hugs as they murmured words of encouragement. However nothing but time could heal the pain in Seokjin's heart, which had been ripped in two and crushed. It would heal eventually, as most things did, but it would forever remain a warped, ugly thing.

It took four more days for the storm to pass. What followed was a silence worse than any of his tantrums.

Jimin told Seokjin in a low, quiet voice that he had gone into premature labor upon hearing the news of Namjoon's demise. After hours the child had been delivered safely - a small, wrinkly babe. A boy.

"He...he's waiting on a name, Seokjin," Jimin prodded nervously.

A name? How was Seokjin supposed to think of a stupid name at a time like this? He'd meant to ask Namjoon when he came back and have him name the child, but the months passed with no end to the war in sight. How could he say it in written words that there was to be a child, something that should have come from him in person. As Seokjin carried on during those five lonely months, he'd rub his stomach and entertained the thought that if it should be a girl, he'd gladly name her Sumi.

Yet it was a boy. Wonderful. It'd be even better if it were an alpha. If the thing turned out to be an omega, how could Seokjin bear to look at him?

Seokjin looked away, out into the courtyard, where the cherry blossoms slowly fell and covered the ground. He thought for a moment, about what Namjoon would want the child's name to be. The lump grew in his throat, and his fists dug into the sides of his white hanbok. He would not even need to bother thinking on this if he had found his courage, if he had trusted what Jessi said and told Namjoon before he had left. Even now, writing a letter did not seem so bad. But there was nothing Seokjin could do now but choke on his own regrets.

Namjoon liked history, stories of myth and legends. One of his favorites was the mythology behind their line, the story of the first Kim who sealed the cruel gods away and saved the world.

"Kim Yeonjun," Seokjin finally said. "Tell then he should be named after our founder. I think Namjoon might have liked that."

He would never know for sure, though. Namjoon was gone now. Seokjin wanted to beat himself over the head with something, to carve out the veins on his wrist because he was so stupid and an idiot and if he'd only trusted namjoon and told him of the child then surely, surely...

Maybe it would not hurt as deeply?

There were so many things left unsaid, and nothing he could do about them now.

Leah modded her head. "It's a pretty name. I'll inform Lord Jeongguk right away."

"Jeon?" Seokjin muttered, a little dazed.

Jimin licked his lips nervously. "There was something that happened while you were asleep. Once the other lords had heard the news...well they'd thought they had a chance of starting some sort of coup. You were unconscious, and the doctor didn't know when you'd wake. They tried to take the baby, to take Yeonjun - "

Cold pierced through Seokjin's nerves, sharp pinpricks of fear that rattled him.

"Who is this they, Jimin?"

The other omega wrung his hands and quietly admitted. "Lord Hae and...Lady Min..."

"What happened? Don't tell me they succeeded?" Seokjin reached out to gently shake Jimin, eyes frantic. "And why are you just telling me of this now?"

Jimin shook his head and hurriedly began to explain. "No, but they would have if it weren't for Lord Jeon. It's fine now, so I hadn't seen the point in upsetting you with the news as soon as you woke up."

Seokjin leaned back in his seat, slowly forcing himself to relax. Upon doing so, he clicked his tongue.

It truly was the perfect chance. The royal consort unconscious, the king dead, the only heir to the throne a squalling babe. If they could've stolen away with the child and made themselves a regent -

Successful or not, Seokjin's rage alone would have killed them.

He snorted, lips curling up into a grin. "It seems as though my deal with Lord Jeon was worthy of something in the end."

But of course, Jeon's help would not come free. The lord would demand something of Seokjin in return. It was just a matter of when he would do so.

"They plan to read Namjoon's will tomorrow," Jimin continued to explain the situation. "It's only yesterday that a servant found it, after all."

Seokjin looked at Jimin, slightly alarmed. "Namjoon had a will?"

"Apparently so."

Seokjin leaned his head back, closing his eyes. "That bastard," he muttered under his breath. So much for promises and vows. Namjoon had thought he might not come back. The consort reached out a hand to catch the few cherry blossoms that drifted his way, staring at them woefully.

"You have not asked for the little prince, Jin," Leah reminded him, sounding a little apprehensive.

The blossoms were crushed by Seokjin's hand. "Should I have?" he asked faintly, dangerously. "Forgive me. I'm afraid fatherhood does not come easily to me."

"No! I only meant that...well, wouldn't you like to see him? At least once?" Leah cried.

Seokjin shot her a look, then waved his hand. "Bring me the child then, if you're so determined that I should see him."

A shadow fell over Leah's face, as if she realized something particularly dreadful, yet she curtsied and scurried off to obey Seokjin's half-hearted command.

When the child came, he did nothing but cry. Seokjin leaned back in his chair as Leah settled the weight in his arms, and he peered at the pink face hidden in the blankets. He looked like a normal baby, of course, but Seokjin had still hoped to see something of Namjoon in him. His nose was scrunched up, face red and wet from all of the crying. There was absolutely nothing remarkable

about his face.

Seokjin felt that emptiness settle within him again. There was no magical moment where love bloomed in his chest, when he felt an unspeakable attachment to the child he'd brought into this world. He didn't feel any different than he had these past few months when his stomach first began to swell, and the feelings of disgust and anxiety that crawled into his head. He did not like how his body changed to accommodate a child. Seokjin wondered if that was the start of it, if his feelings at that time were the reason why he could not feel a connection to his son now.

"He's a happy, healthy child!" Leah exclaimed, smiling. "A little small, but that's to be expected with premature babies, isn't it?"

Seokjin swallowed. "Was there perhaps...a mark?"

Jimin and Leah shared a look, which made Seokjin frown. There had to be a mark. Seokjin and Namjoon both had one as descendants of the main Kim line. If the child did not, then -

"It's small, but it's there. On one of his hands," Jimin said.

Seokjin breathed a sigh of relief. He moved aside the blankets, and the baby cried out, waving his little fists angrily at the movement. There it was, just as Jimin said. Emblazoned on the back of his tiny hand, a red, mottled phoenix decorated the prince's skin. It looked more like a birthmark than both of his fathers' did, less shiny and gold. "They shouldn't find complaint with you then," Seokjin murmured. "All you need to do now is present as an alpha in the future, and your future will be set in stone, won't it?"

He looked away from the bundle and made to hand it back to Leah.

"You've only held him for a few minutes, Seokjin," Jimin reminded him, furrowing his brow.

Leah waved her hands, appearing a little on edge. "It's fine! It's fine! It's probably time for a nap. Besides, I'm sure His Highness is tired of the screaming by now."

She took the baby without another complaint.

Seokjin did not ask to see him again for the rest of the day.

The next day, Seokjin's servants dressed him in heavy garbs of white and black. The cloth felt rough against his skin, scratching him with every movement he made. He remained still as Ru brushed his hair with trembling hands, pausing every now and then to choke on another one of her sobs. He had not seen Ru very much yesterday, but that seemed to be because the poor girl was doing her fair share of mourning for him.

Jimin brushed down the collar of Seokjin's funeral robes, while Leah moved forward to begin his makeup. Seokjin held up a hand. Each of his friends held a collective breath, as if waiting for the other shoe to drop.

"No makeup," Seokjin declared simply enough, voice hoarse. "Not even for the scar."

Who did he have to impress? There was no need for such a thing anymore. He needed to appear terrifying and cruel, not soft and pretty like before. If he was to make a bid for regent, no one could dare to stand against him, nor find fault with him for looking weak.

Leah ducked her head and scuttled away.

Seokjin would wear his funeral robes to the reading of the will. They had already held a ceremony while Seokjin lay unconscious, and according to Jimin, there had been no body to bury. Merely a bloody, broken sworn brought back by a soldier from the border.

A bereft servant entered the rooms, flushed and nervous as she bowed before Seokjin. In her hands, a wiggling bundle cried.

“Your Majesty!” she pleaded. “The Crown Prince...he’s refused the last three wetnurses! Please, if you could just - “

Seokjin refused to spare her a second glance. “Leah!”

Leah came forward, taking the bundle into her arms with delighted coos and soft shushes. “You can go now,” she told the young girl.

Even Leah’s patience and care, however, were not enough. After several minutes, the baby began to cry again, much fiercer this time.

“Jin,” Jimin started rather hesitantly. “perhaps *you* should try...”

Seokjin glared at him, but the other omega was not to be cowed. He stared at Seokjin, a frown on his face, and the baby’s cries only got louder and louder.

The consort sighed and rolled his eyes. "Fine, give him here."

He begrudgingly took the child into his arms, who settled almost immediately. The baby's large, teary eyes stared at him, and his pudgy face relaxed as he began to make a cooing noise. He reached a wrinkly hand up, as if he meant to touch Seokjin. He seemed transfixed by something, staring up at Seokjin's face. Perhaps it was simply the scar. Seokjin was surprised he hadn't frightened the child.

It was a fear of his, that he would be a terrible father. Seokjin didn't exactly have a lot of positive fatherly figures in his life which he could use for guidance. He was hated by his own father who had poisoned him, meanwhile Jae the omega who took care of him did so only because of the guilt and responsibility he felt after betraying his mother. Seokjin was nothing more than a burden to his former caretaker, therefore how could the old omega have ever found it in his heart to love him?

Just by holding this child, the fear rushed back and Seokjin wanted to push him away, to give him back to Leah or Ru or whoever would hold him instead.

Foolish boy, he could imagine Lady Hae scolding him. *Why have a child if you were not ready for one?*

What omega was ever ready to have a child? What omega ever had a say in if they had a child or not? It was the simple nature of things, the way that they had to be. An omega's duty was to bear children. It didn't matter if Seokjin was ready or not. He had to give his mate an heir, whether he wanted it or not. Even if he hated the way it made his body change, even if he didn't feel an automatic fatherly instinct, he would do what needed to be done.

And now this child was all he had left of Namjoon. Seokjin reached out his finger, tracing the soft roundness of his son's cheek. He felt a little better today. Perhaps the love for the baby was something that would come with time, just as his love for Namjoon had.

"Hello, Yeonjun," Seokjin finally greeted.

Crown Prince Yeonjun merely gurgled.

Seokjin could not help but smile. "Should I show you off today or not? Hmm?"

Of course the baby had no way of understanding him, and Seokjin felt a little silly talking to him like this.

"Do you mean to take him to the reading of the will?" Jimin asked.

"I think I will," Seokjin murmured. "After all, the lords and ladies of the Bangtan court shall need to see their new king, sooner or later."

"You don't worry that Namjoon named someone else, do you?" Leah spoke up, voicing the worries of perhaps the entire room. "He didn't know about the prince, after all."

The temperature in the room dropped significantly. Seokjin looked up, eyes flint and mouth a firm line. "If my husband had been that foolish, then the threat will be dealt with immediately. I will not have some distant cousin of Woo or some such steal the crown of Namjoon's son."

If I cannot have the throne, then I will make sure my own flesh and blood will be heir to it, Seokjin swore to himself. He wondered if a similar thought had ever crossed his mother's mind.

He rose from his seat gracefully, though the prince was heavy in his arms, and beckoned for Leah to follow. "The two of you may have the day off," he sent Jimin a pointed look. "Do with it what you will. Leah will attend to me until after this performance is over."

Jimin and Ru both bowed, then opened the door for Seokjin as he made his exit and headed in the direction of the throne room.

Upon entering he could feel everyone's eyes on him, daggers that bounced off of his iron-tight mask. They'd been waiting for him, the guest of honor, to arrive. He knew he looked positively dreadful. His skin was grey, and there were bags under his eyes. His cheeks were sunken in, lips pale and cracked. Dressed in white and black, he surely looked more ghoul than man. Seokjin forced himself to smile and retain his composure, though he wanted so very badly to throw up or begin to cry. The prince in his arms let out encouraging gurgles, as if he sensed his father's distress.

Seokjin kept his head held high and strode forward as gracefully as he could manage. He ordered a servant to bring a chair forward for him and to set it to the side of the throne, just a step below. He took a seat, the crown prince in his arms and smiled at the crowd before him.

"Well," Seokjin declared, voice loud and clear, "shall we start?"

Lord Jeon stepped forward and gave a sweeping bow. "Of course, Your Majesty. As you command. The advisers and I have all confirmed the validity of the will. We'll have the scribe read it here shortly."

A nervous-looking man came forward, scroll in hand. He bowed before Seokjin and opened the scroll, clearing his throat before he began to read. These were Namjoon's last written words, his wishes for a world in which he no longer existed, yet they sounded too proper and cold to Seokjin's ears. The scribe droned on and on about minor things here and there, about small lands and estates that were to be left in the capable hands of Lord Min and his partner General Jung. It was only after ten minutes that the scribe arrived at the topic of the throne.

Seokjin and the entire court waited with bated breath for the scribe to continue. The atmosphere

was far too tense, and Seokjin caught Lord Jeon's eyes. An unspoken agreement passed between them as Seokjin tightened his hold on the baby in his lap.

"The throne shall be entrusted to the one true heir, the only man I truly trust with it. Kim Seokjin shall be king in the event that I leave this world too soon."

If it were not for the child in his arms, nor the chair beneath him, Seokjin would have very likely fainted.

Lord Jeon was the first to move. He knelt before Seokjin and drew forth his sword. "Long live King Seokjin!" he declared passionately. Seokjin was amazed at his acting abilities.

Lady Hae followed suit, though she had no blade of her own to offer up. Lord Min followed, looking more like a ghost than Seokjin himself. Soon, the entire room echoed with the words as each lord and lady offered their allegiance to Namjoon's heir, his mate. Seokjin took a deep breath, chest rattling as he processed the situation.

Never in a thousand years could he have imagined this sort of outcome. His hands shook, and he felt his eyes grow wet, though he knew he could not cry at a moment like this.

Namjoon, he thought. *You truly did love me.*

Seokjin's coronation was a solemn affair. He felt no need for colorful festivities whenever he still mourned the love of his life. He took over as king with very little fanfare, and to many it seemed as if nothing had changed though King Namjoon died.

During the ceremony in which he was crowned, he stumbled only once. If not for the lord by his side, he would have tumbled down and made a fool of himself. It was not Lord Jeon who caught his arm, but Lord Min.

"Yoongi," Seokjin murmured.

"Be careful, my king," Yoongi whispered in a low voice, his eyes looking rather strange in the candlelight. The mark on his neck...was faded, just as Seokjin's was. It was at that particular moment that Seokjin realized that they had not only lost Namjoon to the war, but General Jung as well.

"I must request an audience with Your Majesty, after this," Yoongi continued, lips barely moving as he began to shift away. "A private one."

Seokjin thought his request odd, if only because of the secretiveness of the issue.

As the ceremony continued, he pushed all thoughts of Yoongi and his odd behavior to the back of his mind. When the crown was placed on his head, heavy as it was, he felt a weight on his shoulders. Blood dripped onto his neck, the blood of every person that had been sacrificed for the sake of this crown. He was reminded of Namjoon's family, the opposition to his father who had been burned alive, and his own mother, who had been chained to the madman who stole everything from her.

He and Queen Sumi were so alike and yet so very different.

You've gotten everything you wanted now, the voice of the god hissed in his mind. *Meanwhile she let her wounds fester and rotted away. This is your reward for never giving up the fight.*

Was this his reward? After marrying and subjecting himself to a position lower than that of Crown Prince, after enduring a horrid pregnancy and birthing a male heir, was he finally being given his due? After all of that suffering?

If so, then why...why did it have to come at the cost of Namjoon's life?

He felt the urge to laugh rather hysterically, but to do so now would remind the court of a certain mad king who had ruled not too long ago. Seokjin kept it in and made it through the ceremony, yet he could feel the paranoia and the anxiety and the anger building up even more as he held everything together. When he was back in his rooms, away from all of the nobles, he took to smashing more of his things.

"Jin!" Ru cried frantically, trying to stop him from destroying a vase which had belonged to his mother. Her efforts were in vain. Seokjin shoved her aside with his shoulder and threw the vase to the ground, letting out a inhuman screech.

"Get rid of it!" he hollered. "We have to get rid of all of it!"

He couldn't stand these beautiful things any longer. The world was an ugly, unforgiving place. He could not allow it to fool him a moment longer. He heard a squawking, an ugly sound that an animal might make. It reminded him of that voice in his head, the phoenix god that would never shut up. But this was no phoenix.

No, this was a simple koel.

"A koel to follow along with all those pretty songs you like to sing," Chanyeol said so long ago. If he were here now, Seokjin would have gutted him.

He killed our mate, the god whispered. It was because of the war he started that you lost the one you loved. And what do we do to the ones who wrong us?

Kill them, Seokjin answered back.

His hands itched to tear into this thing as well, and Seokjin could feel his face twist into something ugly. How could this creature dare to live, when it symbolized Chanyeol and all he had taken from Seokjin? He wondered if he should tear its wings off, or settle for wringing its neck.

"My king, please!" Ru stepped in front of his view. He couldn't see the bird, but he heard the flapping of his wings and its incessant squawking.

"Move aside," Seokjin commanded.

Ru, surprisingly, did not budge.

Seokjin blinked, a little taken aback, before his expression settled into something cold. "You would defy me for a bird?" he questioned.

"And you would get this angry over a bird?" Ru jutted out her chin.

Anger flared, rising up within Seokjin's chest. He felt red start to cloud his eyes, and for a moment, he feared he might even hurt Ru. He felt a hand on his chest, which felt calm and cooling despite its warmth. The anger faded as quickly as it came, and he glanced over to meet Jimin's emerald gaze.

"I'll get rid of the bird," Jimin offered. "There's no need for you to kill it."

It seemed as if Seokjin had come to his senses. He stumbled back and felt his back begin to itch. "You're right," he murmured. "I certainly didn't...It's so strange but, I was being irrational. I know that...now. Sorry."

The cage made rattling sounds as Jimin took it down from where it hung. He shook his head. "It's fine. I could tell you weren't yourself."

A small chuckle escaped Seokjin. "You probably think me mad. 'Just like his father', you think. But it's different. This sort of state...it's not the same. I promise you."

"It's fine," Jimin said, though he sounded as if it was anything but. "I'll put the bird in the next room for now, but I'll take it over to Jeongguk's later. Alright?"

"Alright," Seokjin agreed, deflating a little. He was a king, the sovereign of this nation, but he felt more like a scolded child.

Jimin left to go and do as he said he would, leaving Ru and Seokjin alone.

"Do you think I'm a monster, Ru?"

The young woman was quiet for a moment, considering his words, before she shook his head. "Grief makes people do crazy things," she sagely replied.

A smile began to form on Seokjin's lips.

There was a knock on the door, a frantic sort of hurried beats. Seokjin quickly composed himself, though there was nothing to do about his flushed cheeks and askew hair. Nor could he hide the mess he had made of his rooms. Ru shot him a panicked look, but he merely shrugged his shoulders and cleared his throat.

"Come in," the king allowed.

It was Yoongi. He glanced around the room, taking in the broken glass and torn pillows, before settling on the feathers that had fallen to the floor as Jimin took the koel away.

"The audience," Yoongi muttered. "It seems as though you forgot my request. I decided to come to you instead."

"Ah, yes," Seokjin shooed Ru away. "Lord Min would like to talk to me in private, Ru. Go help Jimin with the bird."

Yoongi met Seokjin's gaze, and the king again noted how wide and bright Yoongi's eyes looked. It was almost as if they belonged to someone else. "I came to tell you a story, Seokjin. A very important one. Would you listen to it? Please."

Seokjin gestured to a set of chairs off to the side. "Let's sit then, and I'll listen to this story of yours."

They did so, and Yoongi began his tale.

There once was a boy who missed his mother very much.

He was rather young when the king's men had taken her away, whenever his father had sold her to the mad king who wanted to plant a child of divine magic inside of her. Because of this, his memories of her began to fade. He no longer remembered the sound of her laugh, nor the color of

her eyes. He only knew that he missed her and wanted to see her again.

The boy gradually grew to like the father who had betrayed his mother and quickly forgot that it had ever even happened. He learned how to read and write instead of how to make potions and cast spells. One day, he wandered into town and even met a boy he liked.

The other boy claimed to be a noble's son as well, but he certainly didn't look it. His clothes were dirty and frayed, and if his family had been as rich as he said, he wouldn't be out here on the street begging. The other boy said his name was Hoseok, and his smile was like the sun.

The boy often went out of his way to meet up with Hoseok, to explore the woods and play together until the boy was called away by his father and had to come back. However one day something was wrong. Hoseok did not come out to play with him. The next day, he was gone too. Then the day after that and the day after that, until soon he had been gone for a week. The boy became frustrated because he missed his only friend dearly, and so he went on a mission to find him.

But when he found Hoseok, he found not only a dying boy, but he found his mother. Though he had not seen her for years, he knew this was her. Her hair looked different, dyed a dirty black, and there were scars and ugly marks all over her body, but she smiled and crooned out, calling him, "Son."

The boy missed his mother very much.

He stepped forward and ignored the stench of blood and rotting meat that came from her mouth, leaning into her embrace. "Oh, my dearest," the witch told him. "I'd thought you were dead."

"Come now, you know Hoseok, but this one...this boy is Namjoon. I've helped save him."

The boy did not need to know exactly what price saving this other child had required. He only knew it was something awfully dreadful, the worst sort of crime against humanity one could commit.

"Tell your father things are done now, Hoseok," the witch commanded, cradling the boy to her chest. "I'll be catching up with my son."

Once he had left, the witch began to tell the boy things. She began to ramble off various stories and ideas that hardly made sense, that wouldn't make sense until the boy was much older.

"There's a god in that boy, Yoongi. She's managed to save him. Can you believe that? Gods are ugly, cruel things, so why would she choose to help save her vassal, even at the cost of her own powers? Pathetic. Strange. I can hardly believe it."

"Yoongi, are you listening? You look so pale, so skinny. Don't worry. Once I rest, I'll take care of things. You won't need to worry about your father any longer. I'm sure he's mistreated you so."

"There was a child, Yoongi. He reminded me of you. He was a small thing, so gentle and timid. I think I scared him. He wouldn't help me, so I had no choice but to curse the seeds in his belly. Because that's what happens to the ones who hurt us. You must remember. They deserve to be punished."

"Mama, will you come home with me?" the boy finally spoke up and asked.

The witch stopped petting his hair. Her hand felt heavy atop his head. "Home," she muttered. "You call that place home?"

Eventually, she brushed her hands over the boy's eyes. "Forget it, Yoongi. You've been warped by that man. It'll be a while longer before we can truly go home."

The boy missed his mother very much, and he continued to miss his mother.

Many things happened without her by his side. His father died at the hands of his uncle, or so he had thought, and he was sent to the palace. He befriended the prince there, though he missed his friend Hoseok dearly. The boy and Hoseok had many plans. To be together, to get married, to overthrow the mad king who kept the boy locked up.

Eventually the day came where their plans would be put into action, and they'd get rid of the mad king. They'd put Namjoon on the throne, the boy's mother said it was a good choice. She said it was a good idea to get rid of the mad king's supporters, each and every one. She whispered treason and death and poison into the boy's ears, and soon he thought it was a brilliant idea too. She didn't exactly want the prince to live, but the boy would not be moved when it came to his savior's well-being.

So they overthrew the king who had hurt the boy's mother, and all the nobles who had schemed against her, so that should be the end of the story. The good guys won, and the boy lived happily ever after with his mother, right?

Except they didn't.

The boy missed his mother very much, so he overlooked all the warning signs that told him she was no longer his mother, that she had morphed into a sort of monster he could no longer even name. She started talking about wars and bloodlust and killing people, innocent people who had never done anything wrong, and the boy soon realized that his mother had died a long time ago, consumed by so many gods and her fixation for revenge.

But by the time, he realized this, the witch had already started a war.

Or so it had seemed. Attacking villages on both sides of the border, killing off the soldiers that were sent by both countries. She feasted and gorged herself on human souls and flesh, and when Namjoon the boy she had saved so long came to stop her, she -

"What is the point of this long story?" Seokjin's face was bone-white, his voice flat. "Are you telling me it wasn't Qing soldiers who...who killed Namjoon?"

"It was my mother," Yoongi confessed, eyes sorrowful. "But that's not it. She didn't kill him, not really. I know it appears that way, but - "

"My bond mark has faded, Yoongi!" Seokjin snapped. "What else do you suppose happened?"

"It's faded, but not gone," Yoongi explained carefully. "There's still something there, isn't there? I'm sure it was harder for you, since you'd just given birth. Surely, though, you were able to feel a slight something, a tug or a pull or even a feeling."

Seokjin shook his head, standing from his chair. "I've felt nothing, but an immeasurable sorrow and a black pit of hate! My mate is gone, and yet you come here to play tricks with me, perhaps to give me some sort of cruel hope that he's alive when he's *dead*!"

"He's not though!" Yoongi protested, standing as well, puffing out his cheeks. "He's not, I swear this to you on my own life! He can't be dead. It's not possible. I've SEEN it."

Yoongi seemed so adamant, so sure. Seokjin decided to take a deep breath and calm down. He needed to process this whole situation, to try and understand Yoongi's possible motives in all this. It seemed as though the other omega truly believed in what he was saying. Perhaps he was being irrational, like Seokjin himself was mere minutes ago, except Yoongi was believing in strange dreams and delusions instead of throwing temper tantrums like Seokjin. Lord Min had just lost his own mate too. It made sense that he was not well, mentally or physically.

"What do you mean, you saw it?" Seokjin asked.

Yoongi flushed. "It sounds...it sounds mad, but I have the Sight."

Seokjin stared at him. "Ok, so you can see. Can't we all?"

"No, no, no!" Lord Min shook his head. "That's not it. Listen, it's the magical Sight. The one witches have."

Seokjin nodded his head, looking entirely unsure of anything that Lord Min was saying. "Right, the magical Sight."

The other omega stomped his foot in frustration. "Could you just believe me for a moment here? I can see the future, or parts of it. Pieces really. I can show you even, if you'd like."

Seokjin decided to humor him. He smiled and nodded once more, gesturing for Lord Min to show away.

Lord Min closed his eyes, breathed in. He raised two of his fingers and they hovered in front of his eyes before slowing opening them by pulling the lids up. Seokjin had to blink because for a moment it seemed as though they were silver. Silver, just like the witch who had cursed him. Before he could entertain that thought, Yoongi reached out, and shut Seokjin's eyes with the two fingers he'd used to open his eyes.

"See, Seokjin," Lord Min instructed him. "*Look.*"

Visions flashed in front of his eyes, reminding him of the nightmares he'd had over a week ago when his child was born. He saw so many different figures before him, some familiar and some not. Finally, his vision focused and he saw the gardens, cherry blossoms in full bloom. It was just like the scene from the other day except...he saw Namjoon leaning against one of the trees.

This Namjoon had many wrinkles covering his face, with grey peppered throughout his hair. But he smiled so softly as he stared with that lovely look in his eyes at the man who sat by his side. It was an older Seokjin that kept Namjoon company, laughing as the cherry blossoms decorated Namjoon's hair. "Ah, love," he heard himself murmur. "You should wear these more often."

Old Seokjin reached out a hand to pick the blossoms out of his hair, and Seokjin found himself reaching out as well, lost in the vision - no, in the illusion - of what one day could have been his. His fingers passed through nothing, and the images faded.

He saw Leah burst forward into his rooms, interrupting both he and Yoongi.

"My king!" she cried, the baby in her arms. "The prince won't stop crying again. Surely, you'll hold him once more?"

Seokjin opened his eyes to see Yoongi before him, looking anxious as he waited for the king's verdict.

"I've been practicing for months now," Yoongi admitted nervously. "But it still might not be the best. Did you see Namjoon and yourself, years from now?"

"illusions," Seokjin muttered, eyes burning. "You conjured up an image of us, and expect me to believe that?"

He could not help it. Here in the privacy of his own rooms, he could begin to cry.

"Not necessarily," Lord Min looked back towards the door. "But perhaps you'll believe when you see her."

Leah burst forward into his rooms with Crown Prince Yeonjun in her arms. "My king!" she cried. "The prince won't stop crying again. Surely, you'll hold him once more?"

Seokjin stumbled back, holding a hand to his head as it began to ache. He had just saw...unless...

Stop denying it for a second. Think.

What reason would Yoongi lie about any of this? What would have to gain by making you think Namjoon was still alive?

Nothing, he answered himself.

The king looked up, removing his hand from his face. He heard the sounds of his crying son, saw the hopeful look on Yoongi's face. Seokjin swallowed the lump in his throat.

"Give the baby here, Leah," Seokjin commanded, taking the child from her arms.

Yet again, Yeonjun shushed once he was surrounded by the warm, comforting scent of his father.

King Seokjin took a seat once more, eyes not once leaving Yoongi's face.

"Let's talk about your mother. And those visions of yours."

Chapter End Notes

in case you are worried about seokjin's attitude toward yeonjun, don't worry! he will care for his son, it's just that he is grieving the loss of his mate, among other things.

we are pretty much speeding towards the end of this story now!!! hold on tight, folks!

Contract of Nemesis

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The courtyard had been washed in white for days as the whole palace continued to mourn King Namjoon's passing. Any of the flowers that remained had been plucked and placed in the coffin alongside Namjoon's sword, so the only other color to be seen was green.

A light sound rang out, playing a gentle song for the three lovers that congregated in the courtyard. It continued for several minutes, until it finally died off as Jeongguk finished the song.

"You play well," Jimin complimented softly. "Who knew a swordsman could play such elegant songs on the zither?"

The other omega flushed, the tips of his ears turning red. "My hands are too calloused. I don't play nearly as well as you or Yoongi."

As always, Jeongguk was rather bashful when it came to displaying his talents in front of Taehyung and Jimin.

"I've never heard Lord Min play, but you play better than me!" Taehyung spoke from where he laid half-sprawled across Jimin's lap.

Jeongguk's lips twitched. "That's not very hard to do now, is it?"

Taehyung raised an eyebrow, fixing Jeongguk with a meaningful look. "My mouth has always been more skilled than my hands. I'd outplay you all on the flute any day."

"Oh, I don't doubt it," Jimin said, staring at Jeongguk as he licked his lips. He shook his head, determined not to get distracted by his two lustful mates.

He ran his hands through Taehyung's hair, tugging a little on the strands. "You need to go see Seokjin sometime soon."

The alpha turned his head to look up at Jimin, frowning. "You think I haven't already tried? I'm sent away by those other servants of his every time. He's made it clear he doesn't want to see me ever again."

"You are brothers," Jimin reasoned. "He himself may not know how much he needs you, especially right now."

Taehyung pursed his lips, looking away.

"It couldn't hurt to try once more," Jeongguk spoke up. He folded his hands in his lap. "Now that he's to be king...he needs more people close to him that actually care about him, that he can trust. Not people like my father."

Jimin winced. The subject of Lord Jeon was still a sore subject among them all, especially with how the man had schemed himself into Seokjin's good graces. When Seokjin had been crowned king after the reading of Namjoon's will, one of his first acts had been sentencing Lord Woo and Lady Min to death for their treasonous attempts to kidnap the Crown Prince.

In the power vacuum that was left behind, Lord Jeon had only soared to the top. The conniving beta offered advice that Seokjin was all too willing to hear, and the whole thing had given Lord Jeon an even bigger head than he already had.

The only good thing that came from this was that he had stopped pressuring Jeongguk to conceive as quickly, though he did make a pointed note that he and Taehyung would have to have a child eventually, a girl or an omega boy that they could marry off to Crown Prince Yeonjun.

It made Jimin uncomfortable to hear Lord Jeon talk about such plans regarding an infant and someone who wasn't even born yet, but the old man was determined to have his own flesh and blood on the throne one way or another.

"If there's anyone who could understand what Lord Jeon is thinking, it would be Seokjin," Jimin defended the king readily.

Seokjin was far too clever to not know Lord Jeon's motives at this point. He saw through everything and everyone, though perhaps sometimes he was a bit too suspicious of other people. This had only worsened with Namjoon's death.

Seokjin was not the same person anymore. If anything, he resembled the bitter Seokjin from so long ago, the Seokjin that Jimin first met and not the man he had become thanks to the tender love he received.

He spent a lot of his time with Yoongi when he wasn't in court or going over paperwork, which did worry Jimin some. He had thought the two still disliked each other. However it gave him some hope. If Seokjin could forgive Yoongi, then surely he could forgive Taehyung as well.

"I'll try to see him tomorrow," Taehyung huffed.

Jimin merely smiled and leaned down to give his alpha a peck on the cheek. "Good!"

Jeongguk shuffled over as well, looking up at Jimin with those wide doe eyes of his, practically begging for some sort of affection as well.

"Ah, come here," Jimin offered a hand which Jeongguk took, threading their fingers together as he leaned down for a kiss of his own.

Jimin's lovers were quite needy, but it was nothing he couldn't handle.

Yoongi had been poring over every book about the Kim family history that he could get his hands on, hoping to find a detailed explanation regarding their origin story. He knew the first Kim, an alpha called Kim Yeonjun, had performed a ritual of sorts to seal the awful, dangerous gods away, and that as a result of such a thing, each direct descendant of Kim would have to carry one such god in their body, acting as a vassal of sorts. The phoenix on the skin of a Kim signified who carried a god. Yet Yoongi had no idea what the ritual had comprised of. Did it require a certain spell or sacrifice? What did they need to perform the ritual again and seal away the gods Eunha had summoned?

No matter how hard Yoongi tried to force himself to see the ritual, either past or present, nothing came to him. Jessi told him that those with the Sight could not control what they did or did not see. That's why Yoongi could not simply ask to see where Namjoon was right now, or to see if Hoseok was truly alive or dead.

The omega lifted a hand up to trace the mark on his neck. His bond with Hoseok had not been as

strong as Seokjin's was with Namjoon, however there was a part of him that screamed Hoseok was alive, too. He was lost, but still safe and sound somewhere.

Yoongi did not tell Seokjin, or anyone really, of his hope. He did not want to look like a sad, pathetic omega who was grieving for his mate, even though that's exactly what he was right now.

Seokjin had not told anyone of Yoongi's visions either due to the same fear. It was not something that most people would understand. People did not just come back from the dead. If they died, they stayed dead. Anyone who said differently was simply crazy. Seokjin could not afford to look crazy right now, not when a crown rested on his head.

Whenever Seokjin could get time off from his new duties, he would join him in the library and ask questions about his own part to play with the ritual.

"Anything new?" Seokjin asked today, striding in the library in his dark black robes. He gestured for one of his little omega servants to lock the doors as he ushered her out.

Seokjin had taken to being king easily, reveling in the new position and the new responsibilities it gave, though Yoongi knew that his role had come at a greater cost than Seokjin would have willingly paid. They did not speak on what would happen once Namjoon was brought back, on who would step down for the other to rule, but Yoongi knew that it was ever present in the back of both their minds.

"Nothing yet," Yoongi sighed. "Just a lot of family trees and what not. I did not know your father was a distant cousin of Adviser Paek."

Seokjin's lips twisted into a grimace. "Yes, neither did I. It doesn't surprise me, though. The two of them were quite similar. I suppose it was on my grandmother's side?"

Yoongi nodded. "Her mother was a Paek apparently."

Seokjin stared at the scrolls that were strewn across the tables, scanning over line after line of ink which recorded dynasties now dead. So much noble blood, enough that he could drown in it.

"I doubt we will find a record of a ritual anywhere," Seokjin sighed. "They cared about pedigrees, not gods or superstitions."

If Yoongi had not been raised the way he was, if he had not been gifted with the Sight recently, he would have cared little about such things as well. Such fantastical things were nothing more than myths in the eyes of many.

It was now his reality, though. The dreams and visions that plagued him at night, showing glimpses of both the future and past, were proof of it all.

"Remember to take breaks," Seokjin reminded carefully, his back to Yoongi. "You'll work better with a well-rested mind."

"I'm afraid my mind never rests these days," Yoongi laughed.

Seokjin rested his head against one of the shelves, pondering silently for a moment. "If worse comes to worse," he began, then trailed off. "Nevermind."

He made to move away and disappear behind another shelf, but Yoongi called him back. "What? Just tell me."

After a moment, Seokjin turned around. His dark eyes seemed fathomless, and his mouth was set in a thin, determined line. "I will kill your mother," Seokjin stated. "If that is what it takes to get Namjoon back, to get all of this to stop."

Others would think it was a cruel statement, or that it had been said in order to antagonize him. Yoongi knew better. It was Seokjin offering to take up the burden. He would not make Yoongi kill his own flesh and blood. Seokjin would do it himself.

"I do not think she is my mother anymore," Yoongi remarked faintly, heart aching at the thought.

"Let's hope it won't come to that, though, yes?" Seokjin hummed, turning around once more as he went back to scanning the books.

Yoongi pictured the creature his mother had become and cursed himself for the thought that followed: there was no saving her now.

"I had wondered if you would come or not," Seokjin greeted his guest.

Through the veil that covered her face, a small smile could be seen. "I thought I should see this through to the end. If not for me, then for Sumi's sake."

"The child?" Yerin asked, voice catching in her throat. "May I see him?"

Seokjin nodded. He reached over to the cradle on his side and scooped the squirming baby up into his arm, shushing his whines as he gently patted the baby on the back. "Yeonjun is a fussy child," Seokjin warned. "Don't be too surprised if he cries!"

Yerin set aside the bundle she had brought with her to take the child into her arms. With one of her hands, she pushed the veil in front of her face aside to get a better look at the babe. "Oh, look at you!" she remarked, voice tender and full of warmth.

Yeonjun made an angry sound, unhappy at the woman in front of him who was most certainly *not* his bearer.

"Hush now, lovely," she soothed, bouncing him slightly in her arms as she shifted her feet. She ran a finger down the slope of his nose, then drifted over to lightly pinch a chubby cheek.

Yeonjun yelled at that, moving his face away as he turned into her arms. After a few minutes of Yerin shushing as she held him, he quieted down and stared at her with what could only be called bafflement.

She held out a finger, and Yeonjun reached out to grab it, the mottled mark on his hand looking more like a bruise in the candlelight. His tiny fingers curled around her own, and he made to reach his head up, as if to put her finger in his mouth. "Now, now, Little Prince. There's no need for that!"

Yerin withdrew her finger, and the Crown Prince began to fuss once more. Seokjin stepped closer, holding out his arms. "I told you he was a handful," he reminded her. "Here, I'll put him back to bed."

As Seokjin did just that, he caught sight of something glinting as Yerin tucked it into her sleeve, but he said not a word in protest.

"Your son is beautiful," Yerin sighed, crossing her arms over her chest almost wistfully. "I'm sure

Namoon will be delighted to meet him.”

The imprints on Seokjin’s neck throbbed. “He will, won’t he?”

For a moment, there was nothing but silence. Then Yerin moved, taking up the bundle that she had set aside. It was wrapped in a stained and battered cloth. She handed it over to Seokjin.

“I asked you once if he was doing well, if he was happy,” the beta said softly. There was only one person she could be talking about now. “I thought that’s all I would ever need to know, that it would put my mind at ease knowing that he had people to rely on. However a small, selfish part of me...was upset that he was so happy without me in his life. So I can only hope that, if maybe he has a part of me with him all the time, he won’t forget. Being forgotten - for me - would be worse than death.”

“I’ll make sure he gets this,” Seokjin held the bundle up. Though it was tied at the top, he could peek in and see an odd assortment of things. A broken rattle drum, a torn paper butterfly, and a crumpled lantern to name a few.

Understanding dawned on Seokjin.

It was a collection of Jimin’s childhood wrapped in this bundle, a reminder of his upbringing by Yerin’s gentle hands.

He took a good look at Yerin. Her eyes were warmer than he had ever seen them, and the smile on her face seemed genuine for once. It was not the sort of expression someone who faced Death should be wearing.

“Have a maid come in and watch the child, Seokjin. Every story must have a resolution, and this one has finally reached its end. Will you come with me, son of Sumi, and see it through?”

Seokjin set the bundle aside on his desk and obeyed her words, following Yerin to her grave. She led him to the catacombs deep below the palace, the stone steps cracked and covered with webs. Yerin carried a torch as their only light, which she then used to light the others once they made it to the bottom.

A chill swept over Seokjin, and he clutched his crimson robes as he shivered.

“This is where your father kept Eunha,” Yerin said, setting down her torch as she spread her arms out wide. “Though I suppose you already know that, don’t you?”

Seokjin startled, looking at Yerin with wide eyes. “What are you talking about?”

“You saw her, did you not?” Yerin smiled, though it did not quite reach her eyes. “Begging for help, crying. You were only a child, so you ran and left her behind. However you must know Eunha loathed you, regardless of your age. You were a brief salvation, snatched away from her in her time of need. To her, it was only fair to plant a seed of despair in your belly.”

Seokjin sucked in a deep breath. He thought of the twisting of his gut, the poison that rotted the fruit of his womb. Of course it would be the cause of that woman. Yerin had confirmed something that he had known for a long time, tucked under memory after memory. He felt his nails dig into the palms of his hands.

“And yet it’s a miracle she did not kill you. Do you know why that is?”

Something seized up in Seokjin’s heart, and he spoke if only to reassure himself. “Yerin, we’re on

the same side, are we not?"

Yerin tilted her head to the side. "That was not always the case, Seokjin. There was a time where I loathed you just as much as Eunha. I thought of how you had killed the child I lost, and so I wished terribly that you were dead."

"What are you talking about? I didn't even meet you until...until Taehyung brought me to you on the day of the Uprising. How could you hate me before we even met?"

"I hated the idea of you. Your very existence was an eyesore to me," Yerin said this all rather plainly, as if she were commenting on the weather and not revealing a passionate hatred she had harbored for years.

"I was one of Adviser Paek's moles, surely you realize that at least," she continued.

Seokjin scowled, folding his arms across his chest. "Yes, that I knew. What does that have to do with - "

"I spoke with him often, he who whispered in the king's ear. The reason for Taehyung's sudden banishment...did you ever figure out why that was?"

"He had done something to displease our father. Though I don't know how that would concern you. You care for Taehyung, not me. His banishment was probably a disappointment, since you love him so much," Seokjin reasoned, narrowing his eyes.

Such things were ancient and old. They had nothing to do with the present, so why...?

"If Taehyung had loved you a little less, then everything would have gone according to plan. The king ordered your brother to take his birthright by force or accept banishment. Taehyung, that fool, always had a gentle, pure heart. How could he have slit his big brother's throat? Not even the promise of power would sway him."

Seokjin stepped back. It felt as if his world had been broken so many times, only this time the broken pieces were carefully pieced back together, bit by bit. Taehyung, who he had fostered resentment towards, who he had rejected and kept at a distance since the Uprising had started.

His eyes began to burn and he blinked away the tears that threatened to fall.

"Then Eunha came back to me, and it seemed as if my prayers would be answered. We would kill you and the king, purge the poisoned imperial court with poison of our own, and place her son on the throne," Yerin stepped closer with each confession she made, detailing the extent of her plans and scheming.

"You were supposed to have died," she said plainly, face blank. "But Yoongi replaced your suppressants with antidotes. You were supposed to have been humiliated, defiled and chained to an enemy who stole your throne, but Kim Namjoon treated you with more love and care than this entire nation."

Seokjin stepped back, trying to get away from her as panic filled his body, but his back hit the wall. Dust and dirt fell, covering his hair. "Stop! Don't say anymore! I've already heard enough!"

"No, you have not. Listen to me, Kim Seokjin, and realize," Yerin reached out a hand, grabbing Seokjin's chin with her hand and squeezing as she brought him close to her own face. "You hated your brother who revealed your identity to the Bangtan Four, yet spared your life. You hated your friend who let the rebels in, yet saved you a spot at court. You hated your mate who wore your

crown, yet gave it back after he died. Tell me, does it sound like you've been hating the right people?"

Seokjin tried to twist out of her reach, but the beta woman carried a stiff strength and determination with her. He felt her hand slip into his own, and she put something metal and sharp between his fingers, pressing them around the object as his hand involuntarily curled into a fist. Her eyes glinted in the firelight of the torches, and for the first time in a long time, Seokjin was afraid.

He thought he heard someone snarl or scream at him, the sound inhuman, and briefly wondered if perhaps it was the ghosts around him, or even those hidden inside.

Slowly, Yerin took a step back, retracting her hands from Seokjin.

"You wanted revenge on those who made you suffer. You promised that god of yours that you would make them pay. How do you think this sort of thing is ever going to end if you don't take revenge?"

Seokjin tightened his hold on what Yerin had given him, and he felt his back flare with heat. The demon was beckoning him onward, chanting all sorts of encouragement in his ear. The memories surged within him, of his humiliation and his hatred, of all the times he had betrayed. If Yerin had truly been one of the causes, then wouldn't it be ok?

"I know what sort of sacrifice must be made," Yerin softly said. "Do you?"

He moved without thinking, eyes blinded by red and throat swollen with gold, a blur of crimson and orange as he felt those talons sink into his back and rake down the phoenix mark in glee. His hand felt hot and wet, dripping with red as he heard the awful sound of pierced flesh. Yerin gave a strangled yelp, pushed back by the force of Seokjin's stab. Her hands curled around Seokjin's own gently, carefully trying to pull the knife out.

His eyes cleared, and so did his mind. Seokjin stepped back and yanked the knife out of Yerin's gut. Warm blood gushed out, flowing like a slow river down her belly, bleeding onto her thighs and staining her hanbok an ugly brown shade.

Seokjin stared at Yerin in horror, but found no accusation in her eyes. Nothing. He couldn't even see fear.

"Seokjin!" someone yelled. "What have you done?"

Seokjin whipped his head, finding Yoongi at the bottom of the stairs that led to this hell, clutching his chest.

Yerin fell to her knees, pressing at her wet gut with her hands, but the pressure was useless. Seokjin had stabbed her in a delicate spot. She would not recover.

"He did what needed to be done," Yerin stated, voice weak. Her breaths came in weak and shallow pants. "Eunha will be here soon. With Namjoon. The way should be clear to you now. You will...see it."

A sudden light began to burn, glowing in the darkness of that tomb. It made up a bright design, an array of circles and characters. Seokjin stepped back, looking around him and found that the symbols were everywhere, even under their very feet.

"Yerin...what...what is this?" Seokjin asked.

Yoongi answered in a voice filled with awe, “It’s the ritual. I recognize these sorts of signs, just like that of a regular sealing, but somehow more sophisticated...the ritual has started, but how?”

Yerin finally fell over onto her side. Not once did her eyes leave Seokjin’s. She reached out her bloody hand, trembling, and crushed a vial of something red between her fingers.

“S-sumi,” she gasped. It was the last thing she said.

Seokjin felt two hands come from behind, grabbing at his throat gently, talons grazing at the bonding mark at his neck.

“The contract is complete,” a dark, booming voice crowed. “Would you like to greet this one properly?”

Seokjin took a deep breath and turned around to face the god he’d hosted all these years.

Chapter End Notes

ahaha....long time no see???

T_T next chapter is the last official chapter, followed by an epilogue + extra! it's kind of crazy how i'm finally arriving at the end of this journey!! thank you, thank you to everyone who has stuck around for so long, that has dealt with my sporadic, awful update schedule. i love and appreciate each and every one of you so much!!!

pls enjoy the last official chapter of 'rising sun (my heart bleeds for you)'! <3 it will be posted in an hour or two from now!

Resolution

Chapter Summary

The final showdown.

Chapter Notes

i hope everyone is safe and making the most of quarantine (if you're having to stay home rn!) this is the last official chapter of rising sun, however the epilogue that follows will take place immediately after this chapter ends and include several time skips to wrap some loose ends together.

i can't say it enough, but thank you so much to everyone who has stuck with me for so long. i started this story back when i was a senior in high school, and i am now a sophomore in college. one of the struggles that Jin faced in this story was a reflection of what was going on in my own life, and i feel like "Rising Sun" is - in a way - a snapshot of my life during this time.

this is going to be the longest fanfic that I have ever written, let alone completed. I am so grateful that i had all of you by my side! Even though there's the epilogue and extra left, i already feel rather melancholic. :')

ahhh, pls enjoy this chapter!!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

A mirror appeared before him, towering in its glowing magnificence. The mighty god that had been sealed inside of Seokjin for all of his life was no more than a reflection of himself, a doll made of human flesh and glowing red eyes.

“Y-you are...” Seokjin stuttered, tripping over his words as he stumbled back in fear. He looked around him, only to see that it seemed as if time itself had stopped.

The god leaned forward and grabbed Seokjin’s chin. “Surely you can guess my name by now, Kim Seokjin?”

“Wrath,” Seokjin murmured, mouth full of cotton. “You are the god of wrath and revenge.”

The god let go of his face and leaned back to laugh. “But of course! And how well fed your rage kept me. You were one of the most angry hosts I’ve had in quite a while, and I had the legendary Queen Kim Daena as my master last.”

“Why are you here now?” Seokjin asked. “What need does the ritual have of you?”

Wrath shrugged his shoulders, holding out one of his hands. “The ritual is to seal the gods, is it not? I am a god. You will seal me and all the others that the Dark Mage has kept inside her all

these years.”

Seokjin paused for a moment. “And you will...cooperate?”

“I am yours to command, as the contract dictates,” the god before him licked his lips sleazily. “Ah, that woman’s blood was so sweet. It’s a shame I only had a taste of it before the array took the rest.”

Seokjin narrowed his eyes. “Tell me what you know of the ritual. How did Yerin start it?”

The god explained it all instantly. “The blood of the Kim heir and a willing sacrifice, unspared. Yerin took blood from your child when she held him, then offered it up as she did her own life, crushing the vial that held the blood in her own hand. She’s started this ritual for you at the cost of her own life. The least you can do is follow through, my friend.”

Seokjin glanced over at where Yerin’s body lay, eyes wide open and lifeless yet her mouth curved up in one final smile. Yoongi had crouched beside her to futilely check her injuries, his own face frozen in a helpless expression. Not a single part of him moved, as if time itself had stopped.

“We are closed off from the real world in this space, with time outside frozen. After I destroy this space at your command, time will reset.”

“And what do I do after that? This is...all happening too fast. I don’t know if I should even trust you,” Seokjin narrowed his eyes.

The mirror image cocked his head to the side, smiling. “Now, now, Seokjin! What’s this about trust? I’ve been with you since you entered this world. I’ve witnessed each and every awful, traumatizing thing you’ve been through. I know your guilt and your fear, can taste your desire like it’s my own, and every ugly, dark thing you’ve thought has crossed mine as well...yet you seem to think I can’t be trusted?”

Seokjin jutted his chin out, indignant. “Why did you wait this long to see me, to talk to me face-to-face?”

“I had no way of doing so,” Wrath shrugged his shoulders. “I cannot just come and go as I please. I had to grow and be given nourishment. Besides, I spoke to you, whispered such ugly thoughts in your ear! Surely you haven’t forgotten that?”

Seokjin remembered the demon that echoed his ugliest thoughts, the claws that rubbed the skin on his back raw. “How do I get rid of Eunha? She’s too powerful. I don’t even know if Yoongi could handle her, yet I promised him it would not come to that.”

“You must incinerate the host that is vile if you hope to seal the gods. It’s as simple as that. My love and I shall do the rest for you. The next steps require a magic that is more complex than I’m afraid either you or your White Witch could handle.”

Seokjin took a deep breath. He looked down at his hands, stained by Yerin’s red. They were trembling, no matter how hard he tried to steel himself. “Fine. Start time again. Destroy this place,” he commanded.

With a snap of his fingers, Wrath did as he was asked. Time resumed, and the god slowly but surely faded away. Seokjin was left alone with Yoongi and the corpse of Yerin, surrounded by glowing arrays.

“A sacrificial ritual!” Yoongi spat, disgusted. “It’s the ugliest kind of magic, yet the strongest.”

“She knew about it,” Seokjin remarked, voice faint. “How did she know?”

“Yerin wasn’t a witch,” Yoongi admitted. “But her mother was a witch from the West, and she’d been involved with magic ever since she was young. Perhaps she stumbled across it, or was told something once long ago that helped her find out about it.”

Yoongi’s slender, gnarled fingers drifted across Yerin’s eyelids to shut them.

“Would you believe if I told you she woke up the god that I carry? Or perhaps I should say she released him?” Seokjin imparted, coming closer.

“I would be more surprised if she hadn’t. Where is he? What has he said?” Yoongi looked around.

“He told me we have to burn her. He and another will do the rest apparently.” Seokjin relayed the information to his friend.

Yoongi lowered his gaze and clenched his hands into fists. “Of course. Simple as that, huh?” he muttered.

Seokjin opened his mouth, about to say more, when he felt a sudden chill, as if a gust of piercing wind had just entered. He shivered, wrapping his arms tight around himself, and froze at the familiar voice that spoke.

“Ah, Prince Seokjin!” Eunha crowed. “How perfect! Yerin and my son have saved me the trouble of fetching you myself, I see!”

Slowly, ever so slowly, Seokjin turned his head to meet the face of the woman who had haunted him for so long, the witch who had killed his mate.

She was truly a dreadful sight to behold, appearing more monster than mage. Her skin was wrinkled and ghastly white, her long hair messy and thin as it hung over her face like a shroud. Eunha’s malnourished body seemed to drown in the heavy, black garments she wore. The most pleasant thing about her were her silver eyes, which shined like pearls. As she came closer, an entourage of shadows followed her. Her dry, cracked lips spread up into an ugly smile, and she opened her arms, almost as if she was about to come over and hug him.

Seokjin flinched at the sight of her, bile rising up his throat.

Eunha paused at his reaction, hands falling to her sides. She cocked her head, gaze drifting down to the corpse that lay a few feet away from him.

“Yerin,” she murmured, eyelids fluttering.

A look of grief flashed across her face, and Seokjin thought perhaps she might be regretful, yet -

She cackled, throwing her head back as her eerie, high-pitched laugh rang throughout the entire catacombs. “You fool!” she declared, voice filled with mirth. “How fucking stupid are you? Your mom really did raise an idiot, a good-for-nothing! I really wish I killed you all those years ago! Maybe then you would’ve been useful!”

Eunha glanced around quickly, eyes darting this way and that. “I suppose she had a change of heart at the last second,” she scoffed. “Look at all this! What a horrible trap. Did you really think a fucking array would stop me?”

She stepped forward, bare foot on one of the glowing lines, and a crunch followed. The light of the array fluttered once, then dimmed completely. Seokjin felt a fear unlike anything he’d ever felt

before grip him, and he shared a panicked look with Yoongi.

“I’ve been held down by curses and chains more powerful than you could ever know. For days and days and days, I suffered beatings and torture and the touch of that man! The old me might have been weak enough to fall under this array, but the new me has been remade into something greater. I am no mere mortal witch. No, it is a hundred gods who stand before you, ready to pass judgement.”

Her tirade became more passionate, filled with fury and righteousness, and for a moment, Seokjin could almost believe she brandished the sword of justice.

“Mother,” Yoongi spoke for the first time since his mother had arrived. Each and every word seemed to physically pain him. “You were right to get revenge. It was fine that you wanted to kill the king and Advisor Paek and even Father but, but! Why did you have to go after the rest of the court? The Kim family? The citizens? They didn’t do anything at all!”

She turned her head slowly to meet her son’s gaze, and it appeared as if she had forgotten he was even there, so focused on Seokjin was she.

“Do you understand how betrayed I felt?” she whispered, voice deadly. “My only lover, the father of my child, had handed me over like a brood mare to some vile king. It was all arranged by the courtiers, and the whole world did nothing to free me from my shackles. The world decided I was worthless. Everyone was content to let me rot in that dungeon and so, so! The whole world is my enemy! Tell me, sweet child, wouldn’t you have felt the same? How could I have possibly forgiven something like that, Yoongi? Could you have done so?”

Yoongi merely shook his head, as if he could not find the words he wanted or needed to say. Or perhaps he knew that there was no more reasoning with his mother, not when she had been consumed by her need for revenge.

This is what I almost became, Seokjin realized, feeling the familiar flare of Wrath in his veins. *If I had truly gutted my heart and destroyed everything, including those I loved, I would have been no different than the creature that stands before me.*

“You wear her face and go by her name, but you are no longer Eunha,” Seokjin stated, finding his courage. “No wonder Yerin abandoned you. She could no longer stand the sight of the monster that masqueraded as her friend!”

“A monster? Is that what I am?” Eunha laughed. “Now that I am strong, and not weak? Would you prefer I was the poor, wailing omega from all those other years ago?”

She narrowed her eyes. “No matter. I won’t have to hear anything else from you. The Kim line ends here!”

Eunha stretched out her arms and one of the figures surged forward. Seokjin swore under his breath, clenching the dagger Yerin had given him tight as he raised it to try and deflect any blow that might come his way. His weapon was knocked aside by a scarred hand all too quickly, and Seokjin felt himself thrown against the hard, stone wall of the crypts, neck enclosed in a punishing grip by two hands. He gasped, windpipe crushed, and tried to claw at the hands that choked him, looking up to see, to see -

He stopped clawing at the hands. The hood of the cloaked figure had fallen, their face revealed for all to see. Seokjin was dreaming. He had to be. Because the person that stood before him, the alpha he saw -

It was his mate.

It was Namjoon.

“Namjoon,” he gasped, throat burning. He felt a wetness gather at his eyes. Relief swept over him, pure euphoria as he realized that Yoongi’s Sight was real, that their future together was possible, that he wasn’t crazy for thinking their bond had not completely vanished, that Namjoon might come home to him, might see their son -

The grip on his throat tightened, cutting off his flurry of happy thoughts.

He sputtered and choked, hands delicately wrapped around Namjoon’s own. “Namjoon, love, look! It’s me! It’s Seokjin, please!” he rasped out.

But there was no reflection in Namjoon’s usually warm golden eyes, not even a sliver of light, and his hold tightened once more.

“Your mate is gone, Prince Seokjin,” Eunha sneered. “His soul was destroyed. This is a mere puppet, a shell of the vassal he once was, that will follow my every order. How poetic that he’ll be the one to kill you!”

Her words rang in Seokjin’s ears, but he refused to believe them. His kind, loving alpha would never have done such a thing. “Namjoon,” he whimpered. “Please!”

But those dark eyes stared back at him, fathomless and empty.

He heard the god speak to him, mutter something quick and urgent about how Eunha was a liar and that Namjoon was still there, sealed away, but how did he know? More importantly, what could Seokjin even do to free Namjoon of whatever control Eunha had over him?

“Don’t draw it out too long,” Eunha drawled, turning away to face her son, advancing on him slowly. “I’ll need to collect that god of his.”

Seokjin reached out through the fragments of their bond, feeling for any part of Namjoon that might be hidden away there, but he hit a wall of sorts, unable to connect to anything. There were black spots appearing in the omega’s vision now, and all he could see was the hard line of Namjoon’s mouth, the stillness of his entire face.

Seokjin lifted up a shaky hand, breathing through strangled gasps as he felt the last puffs of air leave his lungs, and he touched Namjoon’s cheek, ever so tender and soft.

What did he say? What should he do? Would it really be so bad, to die at the hand of the one he loved?

But there was Yeonjun to worry about, his brother and his friends as well. Not to mention the guilt if Namjoon ever came back to see what he had done.

He could not die here at the hands of his mate, even if a part of him wanted that very desperately.

The blood on Seokjin’s hand was drying, yet still wet enough to leave streaks across Namjoon’s skin as he rubbed his thumb across his cheekbone. There were so many words left unsaid between them, so many precious things that Seokjin had hidden away and coveted for himself, ashamed and too shy to say

There was one thing, though, one particular phrase that he had always carefully guarded close to

his heart.

“I love you, Namjoon,” he finally gasped out.

The words had been implied. For so long, Seokjin had danced around his feelings. Even at the end when Namjoon had gone off to war, he had been unable to say those three words again, afraid he would be burned.

With Seokjin’s declaration, a weight was lifted off his shoulders, and the grip on his throat loosened. It was as if the chains that tethered Seokjin’s heart were finally released, and he could finally, finally -

“My heart bleeds for you,” Seokjin whispered, voice raspy.

Namjoon dropped his hands, retreating as if burned, and his eyes flared with recognition. Seokjin grabbed onto him, refusing to let go.

“Come back to me, Joon,” Seokjin crooned, hand moving to the shadow of teeth marks on the alpha’s neck, the proof that he belonged to none other than Seokjin himself. “Come back and live. You’ve done it once before, yes? Now do it again. For me.”

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Yoongi tussling with his mother, her claws swiping at him as she wrestled him to the ground, aiming for his eyes, and he heard Eunha’s frantic screaming.

“What are you doing, you fool? Kill him now!” she hollered, turning to see Namjoon just standing there, having paused in his task.

Namjoon simply stood there, and his mouth began to move wordlessly. Seokjin leaned forward, nosed at the mark on Namjoon’s neck, trailing his finger across the twin phoenix on the other side as well.

“We have a son, Joon,” Seokjin murmured. “Surely you will come home and see him. He has a mark just like ours on one of his tiny hands.”

There was a deep breath, and Namjoon seemed to shiver, his entire body trembling as he came back to himself. Seokjin reached out through the bond and felt -

A glowing warmth answered him back.

“Seokjin,” Namjoon gasped.

The omega trembled, and his eyes turned red, filling with tears. He ran out of words to say. *Thank the gods*, he thought. *Thank you, thank you, thank you.*

A rough hand cradled Seokjin’s chin, holding the omega at arms’ length to get a good look at him.

“Seokjin,” his alpha repeated, almost a growl this time. He gave him a once-over, frowning.

“You’re so thin and pale. Have you been eating properly?”

Seokjin couldn’t help it. He laughed. What a Namjoon-like thing to say. “It’s really you,” he cried, breathless.

“You’ve got to be kidding me!” Eunha snarled suddenly. Her face had been scratched, three lines of red pearling across a cheek. “I destroyed you, turned you to ash! How did you survive?”

Namjoon hissed, clutching at his head as he leaned over. Seokjin leaned forward, frantically trying

to see what was wrong. He caught sight of ash flowing in the wind, falling from Namjoon's neck.

"What?" he muttered.

My love, he heard Wrath say. *There you are.*

"You are not the only one who can bring something back from the abyss," a light voice called out. A figure appeared, hovering beside Namjoon with their features covered by a resplendent glow.

A shadow joined them, off to Seokjin's right, and the omega felt his back begin to itch and burn, as if the skin were being peeled off of it. "This is the end. Game over, for you and us."

Eunha clenched her fists, a dark, grave look passing over her face. "You think you will win, two against a hundred? There is no way."

"You are mistaken," the figure by Namjoon's side called. "A hundred gods? No, you are a mimicry."

Eunha's eyes glinted and she stepped forward, feet falling on top of the glowing circles and letters, though this time they did not fade as they should, nor crack and disappear. A part of the array wrapped around her ankle, but she did not seem to notice. She gathered shadows in her hand, seemingly readying for a fight against the two gods that had challenged her.

"I'll devour you," her pale lips curled into a ghastly grin. "I'll take pleasure in eating the two of you, so thank you for the meal."

"Mother," Yoongi spoke suddenly, voice firm yet empty. She glanced back for a moment, only for Yoongi's foot to find her stomach, a sickening crunch sounding out as she went flying across the floor, landing a few feet away from the corpse of her former friend.

When she tried to push herself up, the vine-like glow of the array that had wrapped around her ankle yanked her back down, then moved to circle around her other foot and wrists.

Eunha spat out blood and curses. "Children! Pah! What good are they? All they do is take and take and take! I thought the bastard was the worst of it, but you are a special disappointment, Yoongi! I brought you into this world at the cost of my Sight, and this is how you repay me? I cradled you in my arms, nursed you at my breast...and for what?"

"To right your wrongs," Yoongi declared solemnly. "I will spend my whole life...making up for what you've done."

Eunha's face twisted into something even uglier, which Seokjin hadn't thought possible. Yoongi reached over and took the torch from where it was mounted on the wall. He whispered something, too quiet for Seokjin to hear, but Eunha's eyes widened in recognition.

"Yoongi, my darling," her voice turned sweet and simple. Her face relaxed into something warm and pleasant, the look of a loving mother. "Please! You wouldn't hurt your mother, would you? You love me too much to do that, right?"

Yoongi's hand trembled, and Seokjin was reminded of the little boy he found in those woods so long ago, frightened and weak. The other omega faltered for a moment, and Eunha began to gather herself once more, standing with that same gentle smile on her face.

"See? Put it down. We can talk this out. I'm sure you can figure out how to stop the array and let me go, right? I knew you wouldn't hurt me."

"It is because I love you, Mother," Yoongi's shaky voice whispered. "That is why I must."

The torch was thrown, and Seokjin could not help but yell out, "Yoongi, don't!"

I promised you. I told you I would do it and yet...

Seokjin had not factored in Namjoon's appearance, had been distracted and as a consequence broke the vow he made earlier.

Eunha was taken aback by Yoongi's actions, but she struggled to move, to get away, yet the array would not let her, and so the torch came at her, growing bigger and bolder as it was infused with the magic of her son.

At the last second, right before she burst into flames -

Seokjin could have sworn she smiled.

But the shrieks began after that, awful, ear-splitting sounds which erased that memory quickly, and soon the smell of burning flesh followed. Namjoon let out a moan, clutching his head even tighter. "Mother, Father!" he cried out.

Seokjin knew he was remembering the own fire that had taken away his family, perhaps trapped in the very memory of it now. He clutched his alpha close to him, smoothing down his hair and crooning out sweet, comforting sounds.

"What are you doing?" Seokjin yelled to the two gods that had yet to actually act. "You said you would finish it!"

The shadow reached over and laced their fingers together. "We are the last," Wrath said wistfully. "Though she was a copy of them, we must see it through to the end out of respect for their memory."

"Leave this place quickly," the light figure that emerged from Namjoon warned. "In the sealing that follows...everything here will be destroyed and written out of history."

Seokjin did not have to be told twice. He stood, hoisting Namjoon up. "We have to leave," he repeated to the alpha, voice careful and soft. "Come now. Come on."

"My head," Namjoon muttered, wincing. They began to stumble, making their way over to the entrance and away from the ghastly ritual that was taking place.

"Yoongi!" Seokjin yelled, looking back to find the omega right where they had left him.

He was staring at his mother as she burned, just as the two gods were. At the sound of his name, he snapped out of it and jerked his head to look at Seokjin.

"Come on, we have to get out of here!" he told the other omega.

Yoongi looked back at the wailing figure of his mother, then his gaze drifted to the silent, still one of Yerin. "What about her?" he asked quietly.

"There's no time, and it's too dangerous. She's right by your mother," Seokjin shook his head. "Please, just come on!"

Seokjin already had the guilt of killing her on his conscience. More guilt would follow once they left her behind and yet there was nothing to be done. Yoongi was too weak to carry her, and like he

said, it was too dangerous. Who knew what his mother would do as she flailed about on fire?

Reluctantly, Yoongi tore himself away from the scene, though Seokjin knew he stole several glances back at the scene. They stumbled up one flight of stairs after another, until finally the stench disappeared completely. As they made it to ground level, taking in gulps of fresh air, the steps behind them rumbled, a deep sound like the very earth was roused.

Seokjin glanced back to see a flash of white. He shut his eyes, hissing, and by the time he opened them, the entire stairs were gone. A stone wall remained, as if the catacombs below had never existed at all.

"It's done then," Yoongi said, voice dull. "Just like that."

"Just like that," Namjoon repeated, wincing as he removed his hand from his head. He turned, looking at Seokjin, who could only gape at what he saw on his neck.

Or at what he did not see on his neck.

The proud phoenix that had marked him as a legitimate Kim heir, destined to bear the burden of a god, was gone.

"It's gone," Seokjin remarked, in awe and disbelief. He reached out to carefully touch the bare skin.

"What do you mean?" Namjoon asked.

Seokjin turned around. "Quick, look at my back! Tell me, is it still there?"

Namjoon did as he was bid, peeking inside the back of Seokjin's clothes. "No," he shook his head, confused. "It's gone, too! I don't understand..."

"The gods, Namjoon! They're sealed now. Where they're supposed to be. They're not inside of us anymore!" Seokjin explained, unable to keep the excitement out of his voice.

He was tired, too exhausted and wrung out, and yet the joy at having Namjoon in his arms once more filled him with energy. He wanted to tell Namjoon about everything that had happened, needed to show him their son, and the kingdom -

Seokjin would need to give him back the crown. His rule was a short one, lasting mere months, and yet it was a false one as well. A part of him wilted at the thought of being denied yet again of his birthright, but he reasoned with himself it didn't matter. Not anymore. He would prefer to have no crown at all, rather than live in a world where Namjoon was dead.

"Namjoon," the tears stung his eyes. "I have so many things to tell you. I - "

Yoongi interrupted what Seokjin was about to say next. "Where is Hoseok?" he asked sharply. "Why was he not with you?"

Namjoon tensed, and a shadow fell over his face. "Yoongi, I wish I could offer you some words of comfort or assurances of any kind but - "

"But what? Don't tell me that he's dead! I feel him still. I saw him, alive and healthy. Why should the gods have spared you a second time, yet not let my mate live? I won't accept that!" he snarled, eyes red-rimmed and puffy.

"No, it's not that! It's just that I don't know for sure," Namjoon tried to explain. "Eunha attacked

me first. I do not know what came after, though I wish I did.”

“If you Saw it, then he’s alive,” Seokjin reasoned. “Your visions so far have not been wrong, correct?”

Yoongi was silent for a moment, before he turned away. His shoulders began to shake, trembling as he held in whatever noise tried to escape. He crouched down and put his head in his hands.

“Yoongi,” Seokjin murmured, a little alarmed. He came forward to try to put a hand on Yoongi’s shoulder in comfort, but the other omega jerked away.

A tense silence followed, with Seokjin and Namjoon exchanging a helpless look. Eventually, Yoongi sniffled and when he spoke next, his words were soft and careful.

“She used to hold me on her lap and sing,” he said. “She used to smile and teach me little spells, and she told me that one day when I was older, when I was big enough...she would teach me even more.”

Seokjin did not know what to say. Grief was a tangled thing, complicated and different for each and every person. Seokjin could barely handle his own, yet alone someone else’s.

“I just want you to know...she was good. Once. She was not always as she had appeared at the end,” Yoongi insisted, voice taut with pain and mourning.

“I do not doubt it,” Namjoon said. “How could she have been truly, wholly evil...when she gave birth to someone as kind as you?”

Yoongi threw his head back to laugh, and the sound was eerie and familiar. “Kind? Me?” he mocked. He turned to look at them both, his eyes dark and his face wet with tears. “I have never been kind. You both know that.”

He stood and dusted the dirt from his tattered black clothes. “Your Majesties,” he curtsied. “I will be going home now. I believe my work in the palace is done.”

Home? Seokjin wondered. *Where exactly is that for you now, Yoongi?*

The abandoned cottage his mother used to live? The cold and empty Min estate?

Wherever Hoseok was. That was surely where Yoongi would head next.

“We should go,” Seokjin stated. “We need to inform the court. The one true king has returned.”

He threaded his fingers through Namjoon’s own and smiled gently.

Namjoon looked at him then shook his head. “No,” he refused. “Not one, but two.”

Seokjin furrowed his brow. “What are you talking about?”

“Surely you took the throne in my absence, yes? Then there will be two kings that stand before the royal court, from this day until the end of our days,” Namjoon explained matter-of-factly.

Seokjin stared at the alpha as if he had grown another head. “You mean...you will share your power with me, an omega. You want to rule as equals?”

“You are suited for it. I would not have made you my heir if I did not believe so. The only reason I did not make you a king from the start was because of the pushback from the other nobles and our

own tumultuous relationship, but now that you have already been crowned, there's nothing to worry about. Besides, it is your throne, too."

The omega laughed and buried his face in Namjoon's chest to hide the flush of his cheeks and the wetness of his eyes. "Our throne, our court, our country. There are so many things we share now."

He held onto the front of Namjoon's cloak and peeked up shyly. "Namjoon," he whispered, smiling. "Come with me. Much happened since you were gone and now....there's someone you must meet."

"Is it someone important? Should we clean up first? We both look rather dreadful." Namjoon asked, raising his eyebrows.

"I suppose we should," Seokjin snickered. "We wouldn't want to scare him, now would we?"

He began to pull Namjoon along, heart filled with so much joy it was bursting. There were many things that still needed to be done and many more hurdles they would surely face, but right now - in this moment - Seokjin allowed himself to feel hopeful and whole once more.

"Come with me, Namjoon. I want you to meet our son."

Chapter End Notes

thank you everyone! i hope you enjoyed the chapter. as i said, the epilogue should tie some loose ends up. we will see more soft namjin family feels in the epilogue, as well as conclusions to yoonseok and vminkook/what jeongguk's father's plans are!! and then i have an extra planned which i won't reveal what it's about quiteee yet lol

please share your thoughts on Rising Sun and let me know how you feel! i love all of your comments, and it is the comments/kudos/bookmarks which kept me going for so long!!

until next time!
~ Selene Ilene

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